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# H.D.: The Politics and Poetics of the Maternal Body

## Abstract

This dissertation reads the work of modernist poet H.D. (Hilda Doolittle, 1886-1961) through the lens of the maternal body, which was systematically repressed and concealed in the first half of the twentieth century despite the very public nature of women's reproductive issues in this period. H.D.'s era was one which saw the changing legal status of women, the medicalization of childbirth marked by its movement from the home to the hospital, the entry of women into the medical profession, the mainstream popularity of eugenics, the development of the psychoanalysis, and the rise of the technology of film. H.D.'s life and work provides a unique opportunity to bring together these major events of twentieth-century history with literary studies, not only because of H.D.'s connections to the Imagist movement, avant-garde cinema, and psychoanalysis, but also because of her personal experiences as a childbearing woman, a bisexual mother, and a patient of Freud. While her personal and social situation kept her on the fringes of modernist literary history throughout her lifetime, the variety of her pursuits positions her as a quintessential modernist figure. Through my sustained investigation of H.D., I argue that the childbearing woman, in all her functional physiological capacities, can be a central author figure. On the broadest level, my work interrogates the relationship between the medical and technological advances of the early twentieth century and the literature of the modernist period. By focusing primarily on H.D., I demonstrate how modernist literature grows out of an individual poet's continual personal contact with the changing technologies and medical institutions of her time. This interface between poet and culture is very much informed by H.D.'s social and biological status as a woman. Each of my chapters takes as its theme a particular possibility of female reproduction: stillbirth, birth, abortion, and pregnancy and lactation. I not only demonstrate how the socio-historical situation of the poet-as-childbearing-woman shapes the production of H.D.'s modernist writing but also I reveal how these themes exist as pervasive anxieties in modernist culture.

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H.D.: THE POLITICS AND POETICS OF THE MATERNAL BODY

Alikì Sophia Caloyeras

A DISSERTATION

in

English

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2012

Supervisor of Dissertation

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Tim Corrigan, Professor of English and Cinema Studies

H.D.: THE POLITICS AND POETICS OF THE MATERNAL BODY

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Aliki Sophia Caloyeras

*In memory of my father,*

*Peter Basil Caloyeras*

*1930-2006*

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## ABSTRACT

### H.D.: THE POLITICS AND POETICS OF THE MATERNAL BODY

Aliki Sophia Caloyeras

Professor Bob Perelman

This dissertation reads the work of modernist poet H.D. (Hilda Doolittle, 1886-1961) through the lens of the maternal body, which was systematically repressed and concealed in the first half of the twentieth century despite the very public nature of women's reproductive issues in this period. H.D.'s era was one which saw the changing legal status of women, the medicalization of childbirth marked by its movement from the home to the hospital, the entry of women into the medical profession, the mainstream popularity of eugenics, the development of the psychoanalysis, and the rise of the technology of film. H.D.'s life and work provides a unique opportunity to bring together these major events of twentieth-century history with literary studies, not only because of H.D.'s connections to the Imagist movement, avant-garde cinema, and psychoanalysis, but also because of her personal experiences as a childbearing woman, a bisexual mother, and a patient of Freud. While her personal and social situation kept her on the fringes of modernist literary history throughout her lifetime, the variety of her pursuits positions her as a quintessential modernist figure. Through my sustained investigation of H.D., I argue that the childbearing woman, in all her functional physiological capacities, can be a central author figure. On the broadest level, my work interrogates the relationship between the medical and technological advances of the early twentieth century and the literature of the modernist period. By focusing primarily on H.D., I demonstrate how modernist literature grows out of an individual poet's continual personal contact with the

changing technologies and medical institutions of her time. This interface between poet and culture is very much informed by H.D.'s social and biological status as a woman. Each of my chapters takes as its theme a particular possibility of female reproduction: stillbirth, birth, abortion, and pregnancy and lactation. I not only demonstrate how the socio-historical situation of the poet-as-childbearing-woman shapes the production of H.D.'s modernist writing but also I reveal how these themes exist as pervasive anxieties in modernist culture.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Maternity*, a 1935 silent educational film promoting the Queen Charlotte Hospital in London, provides a picture of maternity care in London in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> What is striking about the fourteen-minute film is that although it runs through various birth scenarios, including a complicated home birth attended by doctors and a planned hospital birth, the laboring mother is never shown. The film opens “where most films end,” the first title explains, with a romantic scene of a tuxedo-clad gentleman proposing to his genteel sweetheart on a park bench. As soon as he slips the ring on her finger, the scene quickly changes to a series of shots of farm animals: two horses nose to nose nuzzling each other followed by a mare nursing a foal, followed by a sheep nursing her young. These nature shots serve as an analogue to the human sexual reproduction that leads up to the final shot of the opening sequence, a well made-up woman (presumably the fiancée from the park engagement, now a wife and new mother) sitting in a hospital bed, holding a swaddled infant.

The two other births depicted later in the film also avoid showing the birthing mother. In the first, a complicated home birth attended by a nurse, a family practitioner and a specialist are called to assist at the last minute, and the medical personnel are seen entering and exiting the home. At the climactic moment just before the birth, the viewer is invited into the home along with the obstetrician, but our access is denied past the parlor. Instead, we are given a series of shots of the bedroom door, behind which the

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<sup>1</sup> This film is viewable through the Wellcome Library website:  
<http://film.wellcome.ac.uk:15151/mediaplayer.html?0055-0000-4343-0000-0-0000-0000-0>

mother is presumably laboring, intercut with a shot of a clock advancing from about 10:40 to 11:25, at which point, the nurse emerges from behind the closed door to announce, “It’s a boy.” We then see a fully clothed, crying baby, but never the mother. In the final segment, which shows a planned hospital birth (advised, the intertitle tells us, by the doctor in charge), we see the mother being escorted to the hospital by another woman. She is only shot from behind. Once inside the hospital, a title announces, “Labor Ward: Through the Patients Eyes” [sic]. We see point-of-view shots of the hospital bed, a tank of ether, various medical supplies, and then finally a masked nurse followed by a masked male doctor eerily shot from below. The film cuts back to a shot of the ether tank, and the doctor’s hand lifting up the ether mask and balloon, and then slowly drawing it towards the camera until the entire screen is black. We cut back to the doctor’s masked face, which blurs and then switches to a negative exposure before the entire screen whites out. In the final shot of the sequence, we finally see the mother happily convalescing in a hospital bed with a sleeping newborn by her side. In a film about birth and maternity care, the birthing mother is invisible.

Despite such diffidence in the first few decades of the twentieth century, the birthing mother’s body was the site of intense political struggle and social change. In this period, when women were struggling for the right to vote in the United States and the United Kingdom, maternity care was changing, as a result of the new medical specialty of obstetrics and the admission of women into the medical profession since the late nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Birth was increasingly moving from the home to the hospital and the

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<sup>2</sup> See Moscucci, *The Science of Woman* and Oakley, *The Captured Womb* for histories of obstetrics and maternity care in Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See Wertz and Wertz, *Lying-In* and

care of pregnant women was more and more often placed in the hands of medical practitioners rather than lay midwives. Concern over high infant and maternal mortality led to a growing cultural belief that birth was a medical event that needed to be managed by trained doctors (even though the transition to the medical model of care led to an increase in maternal mortality, due to the rapid spread of puerperal fever in hospitals and public maternity facilities).<sup>3</sup> The decreasing birth rate leading up to, as well as the skyrocketing death rate during, World War I created widespread anxiety about the future of British and American society. At the same time, women began demanding the right to vote, moving into the public sphere as professionals, and calling for access to birth control, including abortion. Eugenics as a popular science was in vogue. There was a widespread cultural belief in Britain, Europe, and the US that promoting birth and motherhood among the mentally, physically, and socially fit middle and upper classes and discouraging the same among the lower classes, the mentally and physically disabled, and the racial and ethnic minorities of the nation would improve the degenerating modern society. All this placed increasing social pressure on women, on whose bodies was placed the responsibility of rebuilding the nation. Therefore, women's issues related to maternity care, birth control, and abortion were at the forefront of public debates about women's role in society.

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Wolf, *Deliver Me from Pain* for histories of obstetrics and maternity care in the US. See also Hanson, *A Cultural History of Pregnancy*.

<sup>3</sup> See Wertz and Wertz 119-120 for a discussion of the rise in maternal death rates when birth began moving from the home to the hospital in the nineteenth century. In addition, the film *Maternity* demonstrates that as late as 1935, there was still grave concern over the maternal death rate. The film's intertitles claim, "In Britain every two hours a woman dies in childbirth," and indicate that maternal death from puerperal fever rose from 1109 deaths in 1926, to 1184 in 1928, to 1243 in 1930. The cause, the film tells us, is "Haemolytic Streptococci," the microbes of puerperal fever, which are shown in a petri dish between intertitles. Presumably, Queen Charlotte's had controlled the spread of this infection through proper sanitation. The spread of puerperal fever was not as common in home birth as it was in hospital or maternity home birth because it was spread from mother to mother via medical practitioners who failed to wash their hands and/or instruments between patients.

American filmmaker Lois Weber's 1916 pro-eugenics film *Where Are My Children?* demonstrates that eugenics, birth control and abortion were a common part of popular discourse of the early twentieth century and reveals prevalent attitudes about women's role in the breakdown and potential salvation of modern society. The film centers on the personal and social intersection of these issues in the life of district attorney Richard Walton, who longs for children but remains childless due to, we eventually learn, his wife's multiple secret abortions. The film paints Walton's wife as frivolous and selfish in her actions: She is regularly pictured lounging around, showering three lapdogs with affection, or drinking and laughing with her well-bred, high-class friends (many of whom we also learn by the film's end have had numerous abortions). Not only does Mrs. Walton end up being punished with infertility and the scorn of her husband, but the film suggests that both Walton and by extension society as a whole suffer due to her avoidance of motherhood through abortion. This portrayal points to a commonly held eugenic notion of the period that the responsibility for "race regeneration" and societal progress lay mainly with women.

*Where Are My Children?* conveys the double standard that while birth control is reprehensible for the socially "fit," it is necessary for those deemed unfit. The two trials bookending the film illustrate its eugenic message. In the first trial, Walton prosecutes a pro-birth control physician for distributing birth control advice and materials to his underclass patients. The montage of the first doctor's visits to his poor, overburdened patients in the slums prompts sympathy from Walton, the film's moral center, even though this doctor is found guilty of violating the United States' Comstock laws, which made it illegal to distribute birth control or related instructional materials from 1873 to



1936.<sup>4</sup> The first trial's montage sequence is set up in contrast with the sequence that occurs immediately after Walton returns home from the trial. He gets a visit from his sister, her husband, and their new baby. The intertitle tells us that their marriage was "eugenically contracted," meaning both parties were examined and deemed to be in good mental and physical health before getting married and attempting to reproduce. The shots of the fat, healthy baby dressed in a fine layette and being cuddled and cooed over by her parents and uncle are a sharp contrast to the trial's montage sequence, which included various dirty, sickly children, including a malnourished-looking infant apparently on the verge of death.

In the trial that closes the film, Walton prosecutes an irresponsible abortionist for the wrongful death of Walton's housekeeper's teenage daughter, who has incidentally been seduced, impregnated, and abandoned by Walton's lecherous brother-in-law. Over the course of the trial, it is revealed to Walton that this abortionist has also terminated multiple pregnancies of Mrs. Walton and her friends. The reproductive experiences of the women in Walton's household highlight many of the social issues common in popular discourse of the time: namely, the limiting of so-called "dysgenic" births (those of the poor, mentally or physically ill, alcoholics, unmarried/promiscuous women, etc.), the corruption of naïve and underprivileged girls by immoral men, and the encouragement of middle- and upper-class women to bear multiple "eugenic" children for the good of society.

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Sanger was famously arrested and tried for violating these laws on many occasions.

The juxtaposition of these two films, *Maternity* and *Where Are My Children?*, offers a striking emblem of the double bind in which women found themselves in the first half of the twentieth century, when the poet H.D. lived and wrote. I will be reading her work through the lens of the birthing body, which was systematically repressed and hidden despite the very public nature of women's reproductive issues. H.D. experienced three pregnancies. The first coincided with the beginning of World War I and ended in stillbirth in 1915 at the Professional Classes War Relief Council's Maternity clinic, which was run by Mary Scharlieb, a prominent eugenicist and one of the first generation of women obstetricians. The stillborn girl's father was Richard Aldington, H.D.'s husband and fellow imagist poet. Her second pregnancy occurred at the end of World War I and in part brought about the end of her marriage to Aldington, as he was not the father of this child. The pregnancy ended with the live birth of H.D.'s daughter, Perdita, in March 1919 and coincided with the beginning of H.D.'s lifelong companionship with Bryher (Annie Winnefred Ellerman). H.D.'s third pregnancy ended with an illegal abortion in Berlin in December 1928. This coincided with Bryher's legal adoption of Perdita as well as H.D.'s, Bryher's, and Kenneth Macpherson's (H.D.'s lover and Bryher's husband) deep involvement with film through their publication of one of the first film journals, *Close Up* (1927-1933), and concurrent enthusiasm for psychoanalysis, which culminated in H.D.'s analysis with Freud in 1933 and 1934.

I am interested in the ways in which H.D. found strategies during this time to represent women's bodily experiences and to express sexual agency through her writing while herself experiencing social pressures as a sexually reproductive woman. The first half of the twentieth century saw the changing legal status of women, the medicalization

of childbirth marked by a movement from the home to the hospital, the entry of women into the medical profession, the mainstream popularity of eugenics, the development of the science of psychoanalysis, and the rise of the technology of film. While these areas of research have been individually treated to varying degrees within their respective disciplines, their entanglement has not been considered adequately in modernist literary studies. H.D.'s life and work provides a unique opportunity to bring together these major events of twentieth-century history with literary studies, not only because of H.D.'s connections to the Imagist movement, avant-garde cinema, and psychoanalysis, but also because of her personal experiences as a childbearing woman, a bisexual mother, and a patient of Freud. While her personal and social situation kept her on the fringes of modernist literary history throughout her lifetime, the variety of her pursuits positions her as a quintessential modernist figure.

As books like Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz's *Bad Modernisms* (2006) suggest, modernist literary studies in the last decade has increasingly made room for neglected authors, materials, and approaches. What Mao and Walkowitz term "the new modernist studies" looks beyond the usual figures like Eliot, Pound, Joyce, and Woolf, who serve the singular author function, to show how heretofore neglected writers (especially women writers, writers of color, non-British or American writers, and writers of mass-market literature or secondary genres) might serve as central to modernist literary production. Such an argument responds to the call of Rita Felski in *Literature after Feminism* to read the work of women and minorities as central to literary studies.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Felski notes that "we are less used to endowing female bodies with this kind of authority and reading female lives as rich in general resonances. I suspect this is true of men and women, who both learn to think

While the recuperative work in the 1980s and 1990s of such feminist literary scholars as Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis has made a place for H.D. in the modernist canon, attention is limited to only a few of H.D.'s most renowned works—specifically, her imagist poetry of the early 1910s and her epic poetry of the 1940s and 1950s. But H.D.'s oeuvre spans half a century and includes, in addition to imagist and visionary epic poetry, autobiographical fiction and memoir, translation, and film criticism and filmmaking. This dissertation is built upon the premise that a deeper understanding of H.D.'s varied literary production, in the specific context of her status as a childbearing woman, provides us with a more accurate view of a diverse literary modernism. In fact, I claim that because of her multiplicity and marginality, H.D. as a feminist mother-poet is just as important as the “Men of 1914.”

More than simply rehearsing a familiar feminist recuperative move by placing a woman poet at the center of modernist literary studies, my dissertation seeks to bring together not just feminism and modernism, but feminism and maternalism, traditionally irreconcilable fields. I argue that the childbearing woman, in all her functional physiological capacities, can be a central author figure. In a 1996 review essay on Mina Loy, Marjorie Perloff asks, “How did childbirth inhibit the career of” women poets like H.D. and Loy? She notes that Gertrude “Stein, Djuna Barnes, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Beach, Natalie Barney, Marianne Moore—none of these writers had children; H.D. had one. Loy, by contrast, gave birth four times” (Perloff 17). While I agree with Perloff that

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of women as the embodiment of her sex rather than as a symbol of the human” (17). Later, quoting Robert Hughes's *The Culture of Complaint*, she points out his “evocative turn of phrase, that the growing importance of literature by women and minorities allows readers to learn ‘how other kinds of cultural consciousness can occupy the speaking center of literary forms.’ The authority of being a ‘speaking center,’” she suggests, “is, it seems, more easily and gracefully relinquished to some kinds of writers than others” (19). We need not ignore women's reproductive bodies in order to view them as human.

social forces place undue pressures on mothers that work against their cultural production, I'd like to add that the experiences of pregnancy, birth and mothering could also give rise to creative work. In response to Perloff, I suggest ways in which H.D.'s modernist innovation comes out of her experiences as a childbearing woman, not despite those experiences. Thus, I ask, how did childbirth *inhabit* the creative work of H.D. and shape the development of modernist literature?

On the broadest level, my work interrogates the relationship between the medical and technological advances of the early twentieth century and the literature of the modernist period. By focusing primarily on H.D., I demonstrate how modernist literature grows out of an individual poet's continual personal contact with the changing technologies and medical institutions of her time. This interface between poet and culture is very much informed by H.D.'s social and biological status as a woman. Each of my chapters, as outlined below, takes as its theme a particular possibility of female reproduction: specifically, stillbirth, birth, abortion, and pregnancy and lactation. I not only demonstrate how the socio-historical situation of the poet-as-childbearing-woman shapes the production of H.D.'s modernist writing but also reveal how these themes exist as pervasive anxieties in modernist culture.

In both literary criticism and modernist culture, there have traditionally been powerful currents against personality. Susan Stanford Friedman, echoing Pound and Eliot's notions of impersonality, admonishes that we should not read H.D.'s imagist poetry in the context of her biography. Nonetheless, in chapter 1, "'dear—mysterious—beautiful— / white myrtle flesh': Stillbirth and The Eugenic Body in *Sea Garden*," I

show that, while it seems on the surface that H.D. mostly eschews personality in her imagist poetry, the imagist poems of *Sea Garden*—written around the time of and after her 1915 pregnancy and stillbirth—do in fact begin to admit the personal. Reading the 1915–1916 *Sea Garden* poems in the context of H.D.’s later autobiographical fiction reveals an intense scrutiny of the perfect eugenic body that, like H.D.’s stillborn daughter, promises to be alive and thriving, but is instead lifeless. I argue that the bodies of *Sea Garden* mirror the body of the stillborn child. Furthermore, these post-1915 *Sea Garden* poems break from lyric brevity and strive toward the epic both in form and in mythic subject matter. I argue, then, that the epic and mythic is generated from the personal, and, in turn, that the personal is epic and mythic.

In chapter 2, “Unfit Mothers: Feminist Eugenics and the Birthing Body in H.D. and Loy,” I compare the use of the birthing body as the basis for feminist theories of creativity in H.D.’s *Notes on Thought and Vision* and in Mina Loy’s “Parturition” and “Feminist Manifesto.” Both H.D. and Loy are modernist mother-poets who write out of their bodily experiences of birth. Both attempt to rehabilitate contemporary eugenic thought for feminist progressive ends; however, their feminist strategies differ. H.D. endeavors to disrupt gender binaries by moving toward a synthesis of gender roles that ultimately results in a disruption of heteronormative reproduction. Loy, on the other hand, insists on sexual differentiation and emphasizes women’s reproductive difference as a source of power. Ultimately, both poets conceive of radically alternative notions of birthing and mothering that disrupt the eugenic patriarchal order.

In chapter 3, “Cuts and Close-Ups: Abortion, Censorship, and H.D.’s Film Writing,” I look at *Close Up* as a forum for political debate, which opens up a discussion of women’s reproductive freedom through its review of films about abortion and its commitment to writing against film censorship. Both popular and medical films reviewed in *Close Up* show the extent to which debates about reproductive control are played out on individual women’s bodies. These *Close Up* conversations are happening at the same time that H.D. is undergoing her own personal bodily crisis, an unplanned pregnancy and subsequent illegal abortion in Berlin in 1928. While *Close Up* regularly covers censored films about abortion and other women’s health issues, H.D.’s contributions never explicitly refer to abortion. However, H.D.’s *Close Up* writing focuses on women’s brutalized bodies and points to a larger cultural anxiety about women’s reproductive abilities and rights. I argue that writing essays about film allows H.D. to interrogate cultural forces without revealing how personal the stakes were for her. H.D.’s *Close Up* writing thus marks a clear turning point toward the political, which paves the way for her later feminist poetry.

In chapter 4, “Blood and Milk: H.D.’s Moravian Heritage and the Return to the Maternal Body in *Hermetic Definition*,” I argue that the metaphor and formal enactment of pregnancy that emerges in H.D.’s last poem is key to her culminating poetic and political mission to rethink the maternal as a means to heal a world culture devastated by war. I draw on the feminist philosophy of Julia Kristeva and Mielle Chandler to show how *Hermetic Definition* creates a space that allows for alternative maternal subjectivities. In addition, I put Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s reading of matrixsexuality in H.D.’s late epic poems in conversation with historian Katherine Faull’s work on

eighteenth-century Moravian theology in order to demonstrate how H.D. uses a pregnancy metaphor based on a multi-sexual Moravian Christ, which results in the birth of the mother-poet figure. In her last poem, H.D. is finally able to write explicitly from the body, no longer using the covert strategies found in her earlier writing.

My dissertation intervenes in literary studies by putting heretofore-isolated bodies of scholarship and criticism in conversation with one another. H.D.'s oeuvre demands an interdisciplinary approach, and as such I draw on sociology, anthropology, the history of medicine and psychoanalysis, women's studies, and cinema studies. Recently, there has been excellent literary scholarship that considers literature in the context of medicine, technology, and the body, including Tim Armstrong's work on technological modernism and Michael Davidson's work in disability studies. Both leave out the bodily experiences of childbearing women almost entirely. Still, I take their approaches as models for my own work. Meanwhile, in H.D. studies, the only sustained attention given to childbirth focuses on the topic as a metaphor for creativity. While this work by such H.D. scholars as Susan Stanford Friedman and Donna Hollenberg is valuable and important, more direct attention to socio-historical context is needed. I build on the work of these modernist literary scholars with my own primary archival research on the relationship between H.D.'s literary production and her personal experiences as a childbearing woman in the modernist period, as well as on how medicine and technology generally changed women's lives in the first half of the twentieth century.

My approach is unequivocally feminist in that it emphasizes childbearing women as authorial centers of literary history and makes explicit that important women literary



figures like H.D. not only had gendered bodies that subjected them to a wide array of experiences not faced by their male and non-childbearing counterparts, but that these gendered experiences are pervasive preoccupations of modernist culture. In other words, I affirm that female reproduction, in all its personal, historical, social, and cultural aspects, is a crucial lens through which to read and interpret literature. Furthermore, our readings of modernist mothers like H.D. have bearing on how we perceive childbearing women today. These perceptions have a direct impact on gender equality, public policy, and women's health. By placing the modernist mother at the center of literary, social, and medical history, my work offers an alternative and more complete account of cultural modernism.

CHAPTER 1

**“dear—mysterious—beautiful— / white myrtle flesh”: Stillbirth and the Eugenic Body in *Sea Garden***

Like a skein of loose silk blown against a wall  
She walks by the railing of a path in Kensington Gardens,  
And she is dying piece-meal  
of a sort of emotional anemia.

And round about there is a rabble  
Of the filthy, sturdy, unkillable infants of the very poor.  
They shall inherit the earth.

In her is the end of breeding.  
Her boredom is exquisite and excessive.

She would like some one to speak to her,  
And is almost afraid that I  
will commit that indiscretion.

—Ezra Pound, “The Garden” (1916)

Like the popular films described in the introduction, Ezra Pound’s poem “The Garden,” published in 1916, provides a snapshot of the ways in which gender and class intersect in eugenic discourse around World War I. The speaker describes an aristocratic woman walking in Kensington Gardens, a posh London park that was originally the private gardens of Kensington Palace, where Queen Victoria was born and lived until she took the throne in 1837. The park and palace had been only opened to the public a decade and a half before the writing of the poem and were still strongly associated with royalty and the upper classes. The setting of Queen Victoria’s birthplace, coupled with the woman’s “emotional anemia,” evokes Queen Victoria’s “royal disease,” hemophilia, which was commonly known to have been passed through her bloodline to her offspring and spread to other European royal families. The eugenic theme of the poem is most

evident in the contrasting image of the upper-class subject's "dying piece-meal / of a sort of emotional anemia" juxtaposed with the lower class's unstoppable breeding.

"Eugenists" were, as Lesley A. Hall, curator of the Eugenics Society Archives, explains, "mostly upwardly mobile members of a meritocratic middle class [and] were inclined to despise the aristocracy and regard it as decadent, its power enshrined by social custom rather than true considerations of fitness, but this very notion of its decadence meant that it might be expected to wither away within a few generations" ("Illustrations" 329). The shifting social positions of various classes are interesting to note given that the emphasis is on the "well-born." The word *aristocratic* comes from the Greek and means "best rule"—originally indicating that those belonging to the highest class of society, the most *eugenic* ("well-born") members of society, should rule. In the modernist eugenic period, the well-born are no longer the nobility or the aristocracy; instead it is the "meritocratic middle class," as Hall points out, who deem themselves most fit to rule. Pound's woman in Kensington Gardens appears to be withering away before the speaker's eyes.

While the poem targets this frail and waning aristocratic woman as the locus of "the end of breeding," it surrounds her with "the filthy, sturdy, unkillable infants of the very poor." "The end of breeding" carries a double meaning. For the upper classes, it implies the end of "good breeding." For the lower classes, it implies uncontrolled spawning. The proliferation of the very poor is not in danger: "They shall inherit the earth." Against the strength and thriving of the very poor, the genteel woman is physically frail, emotionally anemic, and reproductively barren. Still, the speaker imagines that she longs for human contact, for "some one to speak to her," but she cannot bring herself to mix with the masses, even if it is her isolation and inbreeding that is the

cause of her demise. The “I” who only appears in the last stanza of the poem contrasts himself to this woman. He is not of the weak, aristocratic class, and it is therefore socially inappropriate for him to interact with her despite his cultured aplomb: she “is almost afraid I/ will commit that indiscretion.” The introduction of the speaking “I” at the end of the poem draws attention to the various social groups in society. While the aristocracy and the “underclass” of the very poor depicted in the poem are both extreme ends of the social fabric, the “I,” as the speaker, the cultured, class-mobile poet, fits in with ease among the members of the meritocratic middle class and “the good working class, a necessary element of society” (Hall, “Illustrations” 329). He is both well-bred and sturdy, and is speaking from the position of the eugenically “fit,” contemplating the current status and future survival of modern society through the lens of the frail aristocratic woman. He observes, on the one hand, the virility of the underclass that is at once appealing and distasteful to him, and on the other a decadent deterioration of the aristocracy embodied in the woman walking that nearly invites nostalgia for a thriving past world. The speaker imagines the woman longing for connection. The last stanza implies that a conversation between them might infuse her with life—there are distinct sexual undertones where even verbal intercourse between the classes would be considered an “indiscretion.” The sexual innuendo concluding the poem spotlights the woman’s body as the locus of potential but also thwarted reproduction and societal survival.<sup>6</sup> According to the widely held views of the period, it is not only Pound’s

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<sup>6</sup> The line, “Her boredom is exquisite and excessive,” could just as easily refer to the wife in Weber’s *Where Are My Children?* Like the aristocratic woman of Pound’s poem, Walton’s wife in the film is depicted as idle, decadent, and frivolous, shirking her civic duty to become a mother to eugenically fit offspring while the reproduction of the poor is, both the poem and the film suggest, out of control. Mrs. Walton, as a member of the upwardly mobile middle class, is in danger of going the way of the aristocracy and taking all of society with her, according to contemporary eugenic thought.

strolling woman, who fragile, “Like a skein of loose silk blown against a wall,” is “dying piece-meal,” but the upper classes and in turn society as a whole—and the responsibility apparently lies with the eugenically fit women who frivolously thwart pregnancy and motherhood via abortion and birth control. The poem points to a larger cultural anxiety about the demise of modern civilization that is located at the site of woman’s potentially reproducing body.

This is the culture in which H.D. wrote her imagist poetry in the period around the World War I. The personal, professional/creative, and social pressures surrounding female sexuality and reproduction circumscribe the space from which she writes between 1915 and 1919, the years of her first two pregnancies and births. In this chapter, I will read *Sea Garden*, written during and immediately after H.D.’s first pregnancy, and will bring in the context of her subsequent autobiographical fiction—namely, *Asphodel*, written in 1921-1922, *Palimpsest*, written in 1923-1924, and finally *Bid Me to Live*, written on and off between 1939 and 1950. The birthing, sexual female body is at first glance as invisible in H.D.’s early writing as it is in *Maternity*, the film discussed in the introduction. But in this post-*Sea Garden* period, H.D. gradually becomes more explicit about women’s sexuality and birthing bodies. I argue that this is a crucial issue that *Sea Garden* struggles to work through. While the birthing body is apparently concealed in *Sea Garden*, it can be detected, especially in light of the subsequent work. I suggest that the poems in that volume that were written during and after 1915 spotlight the physical human body in new ways and meditate on fertility and death, which are inextricably tied together for H.D. after her 1915 stillbirth.

Bodies abound in *Sea Garden*. When we read the volume retrospectively in the context of H.D.'s later fiction, we can see evidence of the influence of H.D.'s personal birth trauma on the way bodies are presented in the poems. To undertake the task of pregnancy, labor, and birth, only for the baby to die in the process, is not only personally devastating but also emblematically shattering. Stillbirth ruptures the fundamental birth/death binary; no longer opposing extremes, birth and death are one in the same. In stillbirth, parturition does not mark the separation of one being into two, but the death of one being. And the death of that being calls into question the relationship between body and spirit. Stillbirth forces the reconciliation of seemingly opposing binaries while it simultaneously problematizes a unified *I*. The speakers in the *Sea Garden* poems are preoccupied with the simultaneity of lush fecundity and death (as seen in the poems' distinct flora and landscapes), the relationship of self and other ("I" and "you"), and the blending of the spiritual and physical (especially in terms of the supernatural figures in the poems). The bodies of *Sea Garden* are simultaneously perfect, "eugenic" bodies and dead bodies—simultaneously divine and mortal. In *Sea Garden*, H.D. works to reconcile such fundamental binaries through synthesis and complexity, which in itself is a modernist intervention.<sup>7</sup>

Susan Stanford Friedman cautions against reading the poems of *Sea Garden* biographically. She warns that "decoding historical and gender contexts in the texts of *Sea Garden* runs the risk of obscuring the nature of the *discourse* H.D. devised early in her career—as if we analyze only the latent content of the dream, not its manifest surface

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<sup>7</sup> In "Modernism and Gender," Marianne Dekoven identifies the following "salient formal features of Modernism": "aesthetic self-consciousness or self-reflexiveness; simultaneity, juxtaposition, or montage. . . fragmentation; paradox, ambiguity and uncertainty; dehumanization and the demise of subjectivity conceived as unified, integrated, self-consistent" (175).

as well. . . [S]uch decoding threatens to ignore the impersonal poetics of ‘the early H.D.’ for whom the historical was transmuted into the mythic, the gender-bound into the gender-free” (*Penelope* 62). Friedman argues that in her early career, H.D. “repressed and encoded the gendered shapes of history—both feminine and masculine—so as to defend herself against their constraints and violence” (*Penelope* 62). The poems of *Sea Garden* may not be directly about H.D.’s birth trauma; however, I suggest that it is crucial to consider them in light of the role of gender in H.D.’s biography and social history, precisely because she so purposefully repressed, encoded, and neutralized gendered bodies in the poetry of this period. Just as Friedman suggests, “Never directly *about* it, *Sea Garden* is nonetheless *of* the Great War,” so too is it *of* H.D.’s personal situation as a birthing mother, and *of* women’s social status in literary history and eugenic culture (62).

Following Friedman, the critical consensus has been that H.D.’s “perfect imagiste” poetry almost entirely avoids the personal, or tries to, while H.D.’s prose blatantly engages it. In this way, critical approaches to H.D.’s poetry have echoed the Pound/Eliot prescription for impersonality. Critics have identified *Sea Garden* as both “a perfect fulfillment of Pound’s criteria for Imagism” and “a powerful and radical work of feminist Modernism” (Nicholls 198; Dekoven 189). Peter Nicholls notes that the “poems are compressed, hard-edged, shorn of sentiment and rhetoric, and anchored to precise notation of natural objects,” but unlike Pound’s prescription for imagist poetry, which is characterized by detachment and impersonality, the poems of *Sea Garden* become “the medium in which the ‘I’ constitutes and reconstitutes itself,” and in contrast with Pound’s “sense of cool detachment and balance, H.D.’s early poems are fraught with a kind of psychic violence. Objects are not held at a contemplative distance here,” as in, I might

note, Pound's "The Garden," for example (198). While Nicholls does not go so far as to say that H.D.'s poetic "I" is a completely transparent biographical "I," he concedes that it is preoccupied with a subjective self-making. Additionally, he calls *Sea Garden* the locus of "that drama of desire which the 'Men of 1914' were keen to consign to Victorian decadence" (198-199).<sup>8</sup> While the prescription of the new modernist poetry was to excise any semblance of the Victorian decadent, desirous self, H.D.'s early poetry defiantly dramatizes that same embodied subjectivity.<sup>9</sup> Despite *Sea Garden*'s abundance of desirous bodies, critics hold fast to the Pound/Eliot model of impersonal reading. In contrast, I propose to read *Sea Garden* improperly, against the grain of modernist impersonality, finding evidence of H.D.'s personal birth trauma in the depiction of bodies recurring through the poems.

I want to emphasize that as a volume, *Sea Garden* begins to depart from the strict confines of the impersonal imagism that it is supposed to exemplify. Friedman notes that the "six long poems"—"The Shrine," "Pursuit," "The Contest," "Loss," "Prisoners," and "Cities"—"punctuate the volume just as the sea flower poems do" with their "mythic" settings, "narrative[s] of violence," and "omnipresence of struggle" (*Penelope* 62). Following Robert Duncan, many critics, including Friedman, have suggested that even in H.D.'s first imagist volume of poetry, the impulse to write longer poems encompassing

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<sup>8</sup> Any desire in Pound's "The Garden," for example, approaches eugenic reproduction, free of the "emotional anemia" of the Victorians as well as of the filthiness of the "very poor." Poundian desire is sturdy, masculine, virile, and also hygienic; it is eugenic desire.

<sup>9</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis has written on the vein of heterosexual "Romantic thralldom," "an all-encompassing, totally defining love between unequals," in H.D.'s work (*Signets* 406). And Cassandra Laity has shown how H.D.'s poetry participates in a decadent Romantic tradition of androgyny à la Swinburne and Pater in order to "fashion a modernist poetic of female desire" (xi).



both sweeping socio-historical periods and personal events was present.<sup>10</sup> And I argue that the non-imagist thrust begins to appear around the time of H.D.'s pregnancy and stillbirth. According to Michael Boughn's H.D. bibliography, none of these longer poems were published before 1916. "Cities" was published in *Egoist* in July 1916, but all the rest appeared for the first time in *Sea Garden*. Since H.D. was publishing poems in little magazines regularly from 1913 on, this suggests that these poems may have been composed in 1915 and 1916, during H.D.'s first pregnancy and after her stillbirth.<sup>11</sup> The period right after H.D.'s stillbirth was a rather prolific one. A flurry of poems appeared in periodicals between mid-1915 and 1917. Mid-1915, the time of H.D.'s stillbirth, marks the point where H.D. makes a distinct move away from imagist dicta.

While *Sea Garden* as a whole has been said to repress gender and obscure direct representation of the painful gendered experiences that H.D. underwent at the time of its composition and publication, it also is a volume that resists its imagist label, as most of the poems had already begun to move beyond imagism. As early as 1925, May Sinclair, one of H.D.'s most considered and sympathetic critics, delineates three phases of H.D.'s early writing: The first is the "pure Imagism" phase, "characterized by 'lucid, sharp simplicity'" such as is seen in "Hermes of the Ways"; the second is the "period of transition" that is "characterized by 'greater intricacy' and represented by 'The Cliff Temple', 'Loss', and 'The Shrine'"; and the third is the later poetry phase, beginning

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<sup>10</sup> Duncan points to "Cities" and "The Tribute" in particular (44, 176-192).

<sup>11</sup> A. D. Moody offers an account of the publication history of the poems of *Sea Garden*. It "contained 27 poems, 10 of them previously unpublished. Of the poems H.D. had published since 1913 only 8 were not included, among them 'Oread.' Of the 7 poems published soon after *Sea Garden*, 'The God' and 'Adonis' properly belong with it; the others, especially 'Eurydice' suggest that H.D. had worked out her *Imagiste* vein and was breaking new ground. After July 1917 she published nothing for nearly two years—a break which decisively divides her *Imagiste* phase from what might be characterized her Sapphic phase" (93n7). Moody includes a list of all of H.D.'s imagist poems along with their publication dates (94-96).

with poems written in 1921 and after, which is “sometimes more obscure but shows a gain in ‘depth and range’” (Collecott, *Sapphic* 143). Interestingly, sixteen of *Sea Garden*’s twenty-seven poems were produced in 1915 and after, and would qualify as these “transitional” poems.<sup>12</sup> This transitional period coincides with H.D.’s pregnancy and stillbirth and is also marked by her active involvement in publishing. As Collecott suggests, the period when H.D. took editorial control of the *Egoist* (from mid-1916 to May 1917, when her husband, Aldington, the previous editor, enlisted and was away at war), “was crucial to the publication of her poetry and even, perhaps, to its development” (153).<sup>13</sup> Collecott points out that “the poems by H.D. which appeared in the *Egoist* during that vital year, when—for the first time in her life—she had control over the publication of her work, broke the mould of ‘H.D. Imagiste’” (168). These poems include three from *Sea Garden*: “Sea Gods,” “Cities,” and “The Contest.” In such “transitional” poems, we can already see a departure from imagist impersonality.

Here, I focus on these post-stillbirth, “transitional” poems where direct representation of the birthing body is repressed and instead we see recurrent images of white, dead, and breathless bodies that connect to the images of stillbirth in H.D.’s prose works. While the lush flora and landscape of the poems suggest fecundity and sexual reproduction, the human bodies that do appear in the poems are often masculine but

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<sup>12</sup> Based on Boughn’s bibliography and Moody’s list, the ten poems published in 1915 and after are, “The Helmsman,” “The Gift,” “Evening,” “Sheltered Garden,” “Sea Poppies,” “Sea Violet,” “Cliff Temple,” “Sea Gods,” “Night,” and “Pear Tree.” This makes sixteen poems, more than half the volume, when you add the six long poems mentioned by Friedman.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, H.D. was excluded from editorial duties during her pregnancy, but could step in after she lost her baby: “In 1915, while her husband was still assistant editor of the *Egoist*, Hilda Aldington was pregnant with their first (stillborn) child and consequently, like Rebecca West before her, ‘in no fit state’ to assume editorial duties. Though in demand as her husband’s typist, she was thus excluded from active participation in the public sphere. H.D. herself became literary editor of the *Egoist* only when Aldington went to war” (Collecott 153).

sometimes ambiguously gendered. Any suggestion of human sexual desire in the poems is decisively homosexual (“The Gift” and “Loss,” for example). Also, many of the human bodies that appear in the poems are dead. “Loss” is exemplary in that it is one of the volume’s later, longer poems mentioned by Friedman as exhibiting an epic, mythic setting, as well as pain, struggle, and violence (H.D., *Collected* 21-23). Instead of lush flora, this poem centers on the elemental sea and the vigorous form of the male beloved lost to that elemental sea. The narrative follows several men perishing in battle and pits the human against the elemental or supernatural. The loss described by the speaker is both the collective loss in battle and, more importantly, the personal loss of the one beloved fellow hoplite, who was swept out to sea and “drowned as the tide passed” (3). The speaker claims to be “glad” that the beloved has “escaped” the “curious torture” that “the gods have invented” for them (4, 5, 10, 9):

I am glad the tide swept you out,

O beloved,

you of all this ghastly host

alone untouched. (5, 17-20)

The beloved’s death at sea is more merciful than the violent torture and death experienced by the remaining soldiers. The sea is an elemental power associated with the supernatural. The poem opens with “the sea called” and ends with “but the gods wanted you, / the gods wanted you back” (1, 58-59). As a supernatural force, the sea is dangerous, violent, and deadly while simultaneously peaceful. The speaker’s peace at the

loss of the beloved is in part due to an acceptance of divine power over the human. The gods' desire for the beloved trumps the speaker's.

"Loss" spotlights a eugenically fit human body. The beloved's body is described as beautiful and strong:

I followed for your strength

of life and grasp.

I have seen beautiful feet

but never beauty welded with strength. (34-37)

The speaker describes habitually watching the beloved: "I wonder if you knew how I watched, / how I crowded before the spearsmen—" (56-57). That the speaker and the beloved are fellow soldiers indicates that they are both male. The details the speaker uses to describe the beloved's body again highlights the beloved's beauty and strength and the speaker's voyeuristic sexual desire:

And I wondered as you clasped

your shoulder-strap

at the strength of your wrist

and the turn of your young fingers,

and the lift of your shorn locks

and the bronze

of your sun-burnt neck.

All of this,

and the curious knee-cap,

fitted above the wrought greaves,

and the sharp muscles of your back

which the tunic could not cover—

the outline

no garment could deface. (42-55)

The beloved's strong body shows through the garments and armor that cover it, as if his body is as hard and well-built as the armor that is supposed to protect it. The shoulder strap is equally as sturdy as the fingers that clasp it; the greaves equally well-wrought as the knees above them. The "bronze / of your sun-burnt neck" suggests that the beloved is as perfect as a bronze statue. The "sharp muscles of your back" show through the tunic. H.D.'s description of the beloved is reminiscent of the visual propaganda of the Eugenics Society, which highlighted strong, fit, healthy bodies reminiscent of Classical Greek bronzes (see figure 1). It is the beloved's physical perfection that apparently also makes him so desirable to the gods.

In the poem, the eugenic body comes to be associated with death. The display of healthy, masculine virility that ends the poem is contrasted with the utter powerlessness of the same male body in the face of the sea that opens the poem: “The sea called— / you faced the estuary, / you were drowned as the tide passed.—” (1-3). “Estuary” suggests not only a boundary at the shoreline between river and sea but also one between birth and death. The point where one can be born or where one can cross over to death. The imagery of the opening of one body of water to another, as aerial photographs of estuaries make evident, is vaginal and visually suggests birth, but this is the scene of the beloved’s death. The beloved, perfect and full of life force, is called back by the sea, called back to the gods. He, by line 20 of the poem, is the one sacrificed before the battle. Of the “ghastly host,” his body remains “alone untouched.” (19, 20). Where the beloved’s body was once muscled and bronze, in death, his “white flesh [is] covered with salt / as with myrrh and burnt iris” (21-22).<sup>14</sup> The beloved is literally covered with salt from the seawater, but the salt is like myrrh and burnt iris. Myrrh in ancient times was associated with death, as it was used for embalming and preserving the flesh. It is also associated with Christ, as it is one of the gifts given to him at his birth by the three wise men. Burnt iris, another flower in the Sea Garden, gets its name from Iris, a messenger goddess in *The Iliad*. Similar to Hermes, she, too, holds a caduceus when guiding the dead to the underworld. While burnt iris refers literally to a specific variety and color of iris, the etymology of the word and its connection to death resonate.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See too Gregory on salt in *Sea Garden* (*H.D. and Hellenism* 85-90).

<sup>15</sup> Such incorporation of mythic exploration within seemingly simple words and syllables is a salient feature of late H.D., the seeds of which are seen here. See Morris; DuPlessis.

As mentioned above, this poem forgoes the lush imagery of flowers with the exception of line 20, with its brief mention of “burnt iris,” but it bears noting that the people described in this poem are put in similar situations as the sea flowers of the other poems. Besides the beloved, who is “swept out” to sea and drowned, the other people of the poem are battered by the sea and struggle to survive the elements: “One of us, pierced in the flank, / dragged himself across the marsh, / he tore at the bay-roots,” and later, “[. . .] the marsh dragged one back, / and another perished under the cliff” (11-13, 30-31). Compare this with the sea rose of *Sea Garden*’s opening poem, which is “caught in the drift” and “flung on the sand”; or the sea lily in another poem, which is “slashed and torn” and “shattered / in the wind”; or the sea poppies of the poem appearing in the volume just before “Loss,” whose “stock has caught root” and are “drift flung by the sea” (H.D., *Collected* 5, 14, 21). Yet the sea flowers seem to fare better than the besieged men: the sea rose is “lifted / in the crisp sand,” and the sea lily is also “lifted up.” “Sea Rose” and “Sea Poppies” both end with sensual images of bright colors and strong fragrances; where the former ends on the question, “Can the spice-rose / drip such acrid fragrance / hardened in a leaf?” the latter ends with a bold statement:

Beautiful, wide-spread,

fire upon leaf,

what meadow yields

so fragrant a leaf

as your bright leaf?

The flowers of these poems are stronger, more vivid and aromatic because of the sea. They flourish in the sea despite their harsh existence. But the humans in “Loss” perish under the force of the elements. Although “Loss,” too, ends with a lengthy description of the beloved’s living body, his beauty and strength is only seen through memory.

Reading H.D.’s later writing about her 1915 stillbirth, we can see clear connections between H.D.’s stillborn child and the drowned beloved of “Loss.” In H.D.’s letters and later fiction where the stillbirth experience is described, there is a recurrent focus on two opposing facts, also occurring in “Loss”; namely, the strength and beauty of the perfect body held up against an inability to breathe and ultimately being taken by the gods. One of the contemporaneous accounts of the birth is preserved in a letter from Richard Aldington to Amy Lowell, written on May 21, 1915, the day of the birth. Aldington writes "I have been rather distressed, because Hilda was delivered of a little girl still-born, about 2 am this morning. ... I haven't seen the doctor, but the nurse said it was a beautiful child & they can't think why it didn't live. It was very strong, but couldn't breathe. Poor Hilda is very distressed, but is recovering physically” (Hanscombe and Smyers 28). Beauty, strength, yet an inability to breathe: the parallels between biographical fact and poetic image are undeniable. The second stanza of “Loss” describes the speaker’s inability to breathe:

The heavy sea-mist stifles me.

I choke with each breath—

a curious peril, this—



the gods have invented

curious torture for us. (6-10)

Here, the speaker is gasping for breath in the “heavy sea-mist,” but this is just one of the many places in *Sea Garden* where we see the motif of struggling for breath, which is especially pronounced in the poems published after mid-1915.

In fact, in the post-stillbirth poems, the inability to breathe becomes a motif that is clarified by biographical reading. For example, “Pursuit,” which was not published before it appeared in *Sea Garden*, finds the speaker searching for what might have happened to her disappeared lover.<sup>16</sup> The speaker traces the beloved’s footsteps, which end abruptly, suggesting her apparent divine abduction. The poem ends with the beloved struggling for breath:

Did you clutch,

stammer with short breath and gasp:

*wood-daemons grant life—*

*give life—I am almost lost.* (H.D., *Collected* 12)

just before she is seized by that same wood-daemon. The poem sets up the same dynamic between the speaker and the divine being as we see in “Loss,” where the speaker’s desire for the beloved is trumped by the gods’ desire. This motif runs through *Sea Garden*: for

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<sup>16</sup> According to Robert Babcock, “Pursuit” is based on Sappho’s fragment 105, which H.D. “particularly admired” in Rossetti’s translation: “Like the wild hyacinth flower which in the hills is found, / Which the passing feet of the shepherds for ever tear and wound / Until the purple blossom is trodden into the ground” (43).

example, “The Helmsman” (published for the first time in the *Egoist* in April 1916)

begins, “O be swift— / we have always known you wanted us” (H.D., *Collected* 5). In

“The Cliff Temple,” the speaker is again pursuing a perpetually out-of-reach beloved, and loses her breath:

Have you heard,

do you know how I climbed this rock?

My breath caught, I lurched forward—

I stumbled in the ground-myrtle. (H.D., *Collected* 28)

Here once again, the speaker is powerless against supernatural and elemental forces, and is left struggling for breath. And the entire volume of *Sea Garden* ends with “Cities,” a poem that closes with another reference to breath:

*The city is peopled*

*with spirits, not ghosts, O my love:*

*Though they crowded between*

*and usurped the kiss of my mouth*

*their breath was your gift,*

*their beauty, your life. (H.D., Collected 42)*

This mostly ignored motif is important because the failure to breathe was such a distinct element of the stillbirth: “the gods have invented / curious torture for us.”

Piecing together the details of H.D.’s actual birth is difficult, but we have some traces in historical documents, letters, and in H.D.’s own later autobiographical fiction.<sup>17</sup> From these clues we can recreate the period in order to understand what most likely happened at H.D.’s birth. Such a recreation not only allows us to read H.D.’s personal experience but also shines a light on the larger socio-historical context for birthing women in the period of World War I. The 1915 casebooks of Lady Florence Barrett (aka Dr. Willey) from the Royal Free Hospital, where she worked concurrently while she was attending the mothers (including H.D.) at the Professional Classes War Relief Council’s (PCWRC) maternity home, illustrate the typical neonatal resuscitation efforts employed in her practice when neonates failed to breathe at birth. A case from March 1915 records the birth of a premature baby girl after a difficult labor: “There was much difficulty getting the child to breathe. It was placed in a warm bath then artificial respiration was done. Brandy was rubbed over its chest” (F. Barrett 468). The baby survived.

We don’t know if Barrett routinely used obstetric anesthesia, which often caused neonatal asphyxia.<sup>18</sup> There is no indication that anesthesia was used in the Royal Free birth, as the mother apparently coped well with the labor even though it began as what

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<sup>17</sup> While both H.D. and Aldington mention the stillbirth in letters to others over the years, we have no record of any correspondence between the two of them discussing the matter. If any existed, it must have been destroyed when, according to Carolyn Zilboorg, in “late 1920, Aldington destroyed the very early letters (June 1916-March 1918) as well as H.D.’s letters between 1918 and 1920” (*Letters* xi). For an in-depth treatment of H.D.’s fiction, see Susan Stanford Friedman’s *Penelope’s Web*.

<sup>18</sup> For the deadly side effects of experimental obstetric anesthesia, see Wolf.

was thought to be a “face presentation” and ended up being a breech birth.<sup>19</sup> Neither is an optimal fetal position and can lead to lengthier, more difficult, and more complicated labors. However, the mother did not apparently require any anesthesia; and in any case, it is not likely it was routinely offered at the Royal Free, whose patients were generally of a lower class.<sup>20</sup> We have already seen in the introduction that Mary Scharlieb, the head of the PCWRC’s maternity home, did not condone the routine use of anesthesia with her patients. However, in a 1917 book on twilight sleep by obstetrician Cecil Webb-Johnson (whose office was just adjacent to Scharlieb’s on Harley Street in London), Barrett is quoted in a chapter on clinical results of the use of twilight sleep in England. On her experience with twilight sleep at the General Lying-In Hospital on York Road, Barrett reports, “There were no cases of post-partum haemorrhage,” and “Most of the children showed some delay in breathing, but in most cases a warm bath was all that was needed to resuscitate them” (Webb-Johnson 156).<sup>21</sup> Ether, which was still commonly used well through the first half of the twentieth century, as we have seen in the 1935 film *Maternity*, was associated with increased risk of suppressed fetal respiration.

Although there is no record of what specific kinds of obstetric anesthesia may have been used in H.D.’s 1915 birth, her depiction of the birth in the “Murex” section of *Palimpsest*, written in 1924 and first published two years later, suggests that some type of

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<sup>19</sup> The record indicates that the patient was left to labor on her own, “as it was thought she was not very far advanced and she was quite comfortable” (467).

<sup>20</sup> I did not find mention of anesthesia anywhere in Barrett’s casebooks. In her history of obstetric anesthesia in America, Wolf explains that when twilight sleep was first developed in Germany, it was routinely used for women of the upper classes but not used on lower-class women, primarily because it was believed that lower-class women could better handle childbirth and did not benefit from the intervention (46-51).

<sup>21</sup> The next entry on the page, from Cromyn Berkeley, who also contributes a forward to the 1919 second edition of the book, says, “I am certain that the great danger to the child is that the medical attendant or nurse will endeavor by more or less forcible means to resuscitate it” (156).

anesthesia was in fact used. “Murex” is one of the few places that gives readers clues as to the details of H.D.’s traumatic London birth, at least in terms of the details she offers in its fictional recreation:

Somewhere a nurse was saying, “she hasn’t much grit. These Americans are all—” (she had thought poor Raymonde was well out of it gone under the anaesthetic but she hadn’t) [. . .] There was another voice. “She has had a hard bout; too much—too much—” but what it was that was too much, remained, must forever remain one with this nebulous quality that she could never quite define[. . .] A voice that said with an arrant hardness, a shrill hard-as-nails cruelty, “no grit”—another voice far and far and far and far of any insuperable delicacy, and undercurrent of masculine sympathy, a sternness, an inviolable rectitude, a strength, the very timbre all somehow entangled in not-pain that was her sudden release, her escape from herself and a dragging recurrent slashing that was death (Euripides had said so on the battlefield) not once but many recurrent, definite death-wounds in twenty-four hours. There were two voices, “no grit—an *American*” and another—another—“too high-strung. Making a good fight—” Another voice. God might have spoken with it. Another voice and annihilating blackness. (110-111)

This passage points back to a number of aspects of the use of obstetric anesthesia as well as the experience of medicalized childbirth in this period. It also links up with *Sea Garden*’s motifs: The speaker’s relationship to the doctors and nurses attending her birth

while she is under anesthesia recalls the subjects of *Sea Garden* who are beaten and brutalized by powerful external, often divine or elemental, forces.

It is likely that the anesthesia used would have been ether rather than twilight sleep, since ether was inhaled by the patient through a mask whereas twilight sleep was administered via injection and would have taken effect more immediately.<sup>22</sup> Raymonde is at least half-conscious in this passage where she should already be under anesthesia. This allows her to experience the powerful nurse's insensitivity: They think she is unconscious, so they feel free to disparage and abuse her. The nurse's assessment of Raymonde as having "no grit," and ascribing that quality to all Americans, points toward the contemporary cultural notion that modern "civilized" women or women of a certain social group, in this case, the "professional classes," were less able to endure the trial of labor. The use of anesthesia in Raymonde's case further supports this notion, since we know that it was not routinely given to all women under the care of Drs. Scharlieb and Barrett. We will see in a moment how the nurses' "hardness" and "hard-as-nails cruelty" is a motif that runs through all of H.D.'s fiction where she depicts the nurses at her first birth.

In addition to those of the nurses, there is in this passage another voice, apparently that of the male doctor, who sympathetically acknowledges Raymonde's ordeal: "She has

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<sup>22</sup> Cecil Webb-Johnson's *Twilight Sleep* and Wolf's *Deliver Me From Pain* both describe how the method of anesthesia was not foolproof and proper doses were never really agreed upon. Many of the doctors who used twilight sleep were essentially experimenting on their patients without having a clear idea of the risks and dangers the method caused. Thus, in many cases, too much or too little of the drugs was administered, and women ended up remembering their torturous births (torturous often at the hands of insensitive medical caregivers as opposed to torturous because birth in and of itself is believed to be so).

had a hard bout, too much—too much—” and she is “Making a good fight—.”<sup>23</sup>

Raymonde does not know what “too much—too much—” refers to. Is it the amount of pain she had already endured? Is it the amount of anesthesia given to counter that pain? The former could be the cause for the latter, and the latter could be the cause of the neonate’s inability to breathe at birth. It is this male doctor’s sympathetic, benevolent, god-like voice that Raymonde hears just before falling under “annihilating blackness.” His voice is “somehow entangled in not-pain that was her sudden release, her escape” from the pain of birth, an experience that she likens to a Euripidean battle: “a dragging recurrent slashing that was death (Euripides had said so on the battlefield) not once but many recurrent, definite death-wounds in twenty-four hours.” This characterization is reminiscent of the battle experience of the hoplites in “Loss,” as well as of the slashed and dragged flowers of the *Sea Garden* poems. “The Cliff Temple” similarly describes the speaker as “splintered and torn” as she ascends the “hill-path,” striving fruitlessly to reach an unspecified “you” in the sacred place of the temple (H.D., *Collected* 29). Going under the anesthesia, being released from the pain, is like dying, and the divine voice of the doctor is like the voice of a god.

Childbirth as a death-like experience gives rise to Raymonde’s “over-consciousness,” something like nirvana. H.D. continues to describe the intermingling of the doctor’s divine presence and the self-annihilating “not-pain” of the anesthesia: “From

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<sup>23</sup> Although Barrett was H.D.’s doctor, PCWRC records held at the Morgan Library indicate that there was another obstetrician on staff in May 1915: “The Medical Committee has arranged that one medical man and woman shall be in attendance each month,” and for January, May, and September, Barrett is listed with Dr. J. B. Mackenzie. This is from the PCWRC’s “Minutes” from Dec. 16, 1914, which were sent to J. Pierpont Morgan. I have not been able to find much information on this doctor, although issues of the *British Medical Journal* from the first two of decades of the twentieth century list him as qualifying for and passing his board exams.

far and far and far—the odd over-consciousness that comes with pain annihilated. . . Pain and the odd over-consciousness that comes with annihilated pain? Vision that comes to the Eastern devotee with his self-inflicted torture— . . . Vision that comes with over-pain annihilated. (Though her pain had not been self-inflicted)” (*Palimpsest* 110-111). That final parenthetical, that her “pain had not been self-inflicted,” is significant. The suffering Raymonde experiences seems to be at the hands of the nurses or is perhaps some form of divine punishment. That is, it does not necessarily seem to come from the physical pain of her own body in labor (although that too, it is implied, is painful). What seems worse than the physical pain of her body in labor is the emotional pain of her cruel treatment and the powerlessness she feels in the experience. She is only granted “vision” when she is “annihilated” under the blackness of anesthesia. She describes what seems like her own death but results in the death of her baby. The nurse’s extreme insensitivity is once again “tangled” with the doctor’s extreme sympathy: “From far and far and far. Tangled with all that, the other nurses asking, interested, had she been disappointed, it was a girl anyhow, as if it being ‘a girl anyhow’ . . . made up for all that . . . A doctor had cared” (*Palimpsest* 111). Just as in “Loss,” where the death of the beloved who has been swept out to sea is a more fortunate and kinder fate than the speaker’s, here, the baby’s death is more merciful than Raymonde’s torturous death-like birth.

In “Loss,” we have seen it as the beloved’s body, “alone untouched,” “of all this ghastly host,” its “white flesh covered with salt / as with myrrh and burnt iris” (19-22). I have previously suggested that this description may allude to Christ, who was given myrrh at birth, and whose body is symbolically the “host.” What was once the strong and beautiful body of the beloved ends up covered in sea salt, a sacrifice to the gods, who



“wanted you back.” Again in “The Cliff Temple,” where the speaker searches for the lost beloved in the divine place of the cliff temple, she exclaims,

I wondered at you.

I shouted—dear—mysterious—beautiful—

white myrtle flesh.

The white flesh is reminiscent of the beloved’s drowned body in “Loss.” All of this links back to Aldington’s letter to Lowell, where the stillborn daughter “was a beautiful child & they can’t think why it didn’t live. It was very strong, but couldn’t breathe.” In “Murex,” too, the benevolent doctor, one of the few witnesses to the birth, describes the baby as “beautiful”: “He had seen it. He had said, ‘I’m sorry. Mrs. Ransome, it was a beautiful little—body—’” (111). Later, the baby is routinely referred to as an “it,” and in “Murex,” she is a “beautiful little—body—.” The “mysterious,” “ghastly host” of “Loss” is the body of Christ. And elsewhere, H.D. again refers to the stillborn baby as Christ-like. *Asphodel*, written in 1921-1922, takes the 1915 stillbirth as a central event in the narrative. The opening pages of Part II find Hermione Gart and her husband, Jerrold Darrington, at home just after her three-week confinement in a London maternity home, where her baby was stillborn. Hermione wakes, disoriented: “‘Where—am I?’” To which her husband replies: “‘You’re right here, here right enough. Thank God we got you out of that damned nursing home.’ ‘Yes. I forget. Keep forgetting. The funniest thing was when they stood at the end of my bed and told me about the crucified—’ ‘Hush. Hush

darling’” (107). The dead baby here is “the crucified,” linking back once again to the sacrificed beloved of “Loss.”<sup>24</sup>

More than any other text dealing with the stillbirth, *Asphodel* is characterized by the H.D. figure’s urgent need to break the silence surrounding the stillbirth. Hermione tries to articulate the thoughts “going round and round” in her head, but Jerrold continues to silence her when she tries to talk about the birth/death:

“Someone, something got—killed.” “Hush darling—don’t talk about killed.” “I don’t mean the nursing home. I don’t mean the horror of the nurses. I can talk about that now. I don’t mean their taking me to the cellar—while—it—was happening. I know they took me into the cellar. I know the baby was dead. I know all that. I’m not afraid of talking about it. Really Jerrold.” “Hush, Hush darling.”

. . .

“[. . .] God—God—God—” “Stop talking. . . stop. . . stop, darling.” “I can’t stop talking. I’ve been quiet for weeks, all those weeks in that filthy place. They didn’t kill me anyhow. Their beastliness at least made me glad for one thing. I was glad, so glad it was killed, killed by them, by their beastliness, their constant nagging[. . .]” (107-108)

Jarrold silences his wife either out of a misguided paternalistic impulse to protect her or a selfish impulse to protect himself from the pain of facing the loss. Hermione’s

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<sup>24</sup> In chapter 4, I will elaborate on H.D.’s linkage of Christ and the functional birthing body in her last poem, “Hermetic Definition.”

fragmented description of what happened in the nursing home suggests, too, the staff's misguided protective behavior. One can infer that the mother would have been taken to "the cellar—while—it—was happening" (the failed attempt to resuscitate the newborn) in order to be spared the pain of seeing her dead baby. Nowhere in her fiction does H.D. ever describe the birthing mother actually seeing her stillborn child. And in H.D.'s biographical records, we only have the two aforementioned references to a doctor and nurse, who witnessed the birth and saw "its"—the baby's—"strong," "beautiful. . .body," and could not explain why it did not survive. In her own birth experience, H.D. most likely was not allowed to see the body, as this was not a routine practice in the first half of the twentieth century. It is likely that in H.D.'s actual experience, the nurses took her "to the cellar—while—it—was happening."

As we have seen, H.D. routinely depicts the nursing home staff as insensitive, cruel, and even beastly. In *Asphodel*, she attributes the death of her child to the horrible treatment by the staff. They "killed" the baby, even if they couldn't kill the mother. And, just as in "Loss," where the surviving speaker is "glad" the beloved is spared the harsh battery of life, Hermione is "glad for one thing[,] glad, so glad it was killed." Here, Hermione is defiant in her survival and insistent that she finally be allowed to speak. At first gravely constrained by the nursing home staff, then by her husband, who is trying to silence her, Hermione insists on speaking. The imperative to speak about the stillbirth opens up a space for H.D. to reconceptualize the relationship between the birthing mother and the stillborn child, which I argue is a modernist intervention in and of itself. The birthing mother and the stillborn daughter are not separate beings but a complex entity.

I want to emphasize the blurring between the “I” and the “you,” the speaker and the beloved, the mother and the baby, in all the depictions I have just recounted. It is the baby who is born unable to breathe, but the mother in all these instances undergoes a similar dying. In “Murex,” inhaling the anesthetic causes the mother’s annihilating not-pain and total blackness. In the *Sea Garden* poems, it is usually the speaker but sometimes the lost beloved who gasps for breath. And in H.D.’s later autobiographical novel *Bid Me to Live*, written between 1939 and 1950, the speaker refers to 1915 as the year of her own death before correcting herself: “Then 1915 and her death, or rather the death of her child. Three weeks in that ghastly nursing-home and then coming back to the same Rafe. Herself different” (12). Like H.D.’s other references to the pregnancy, this one, even in its sad end, suggests a conception of pregnancy based on a harmonious model, where the child exists in a symbiotic relationship with the mother.<sup>25</sup> What happens to one happens to the other. They are one and the same. In *Bid Me to Live*, Julia associates 1915 with her own death, even though it was her baby who died. The loss kills her. She is totally transformed by it: “Herself different.” It is only in *Asphodel* that she makes the distinction between herself and the baby: “Khaki killed it” but “they didn’t kill me.” Yet even in this distinction there is a sense that both the mother and baby are powerless against both the cruel treatment in the “ghastly nursing-home” and larger supernatural or divine forces that decree who will live and who will die.

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<sup>25</sup> Clare Hanson, in her book *A Cultural History of Pregnancy*, outlines three paradigms for the relationship between mother and fetus over the course of the last three hundred years: “In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the dominant paradigm . . . [was termed] ‘harmonious symbiosis’: in other words, pregnancy was viewed as a state in which the ‘the unborn child and parent live together. . . with mutual benefit’. . . A competing model, which gained ground in the twentieth century, was that of parasitism, or a view of pregnancy as a ‘nine months’ malady’ . . . And a third model which is emerging from current studies of foetal growth offers a more ‘competitive’ view of the relationship between mother and foetus” (8-9).

In her biography of H.D., Barbara Guest notes that H.D. believed the stillbirth was caused by “someone breaking the news of the sinking of the *Lusitania* in a rather ‘cruel’ way” (73). The civilian passenger ship was torpedoed by German U-boats just two weeks before H.D.’s 1915 birth. Approximately 1200 of the ship’s nearly 2000 passengers, many of whom were Americans, drowned when the ship sank just off the coast of Ireland. Hearing about the tragedy in a “rather ‘cruel’ way” suggests that the “someone breaking the news” must have been an insensitive staff member at the maternity home. Whoever it was, the cruel messenger had the power to cause the death of H.D.’s child, just as the event that had been reported—the sinking of the ship—seemed to be the work of a cruel divine force: war in Greek mythology usually originated with the gods. Humans lived and died by the whims of the gods. The theme is central to *Sea Garden* and especially emphasized in the later poems of the volume; we have already seen how it functions in “Loss” and “Pursuit.” In “The Cliff Temple,” the speaker of the poem seeks out the divine forces in her search for the lost beloved. In “Sea Gods,” another poem that first appeared in the June 1916 issue of the *Egoist*, the speaker directly, defiantly, calls on the gods (H.D., *Collected* 29-31). This anticipates Hermione’s need to speak, to confront the powerful forces that act upon her, and to make sense of the paradoxical entanglement of birth and death.

“Sea Gods” is divided into three sections. The first section describes a battered seascape where the gods are absent:

sand—drift—rocks—rubble of the sea—

the broken hulk of a ship,

hung with shreds of rope,

pallid under the cracked pitch. (2-5)

The repetition of the “r,” “sh,” “p,” and “k” sounds in this opening stanza mimic the sounds of a destructive sea banging around debris. The first two stanzas begin with the refrain “They say there is no hope,” pointing to an utter despair. The scene is one of such destruction, even the sea gods have been battered so much that they too have apparently been destroyed:

They say you are twisted by the sea,

you are cut apart

by wave-break upon wave-break,

that you are misshapen by the sharp rocks,

broken by the rasp and after-rasp.

That you are cut, torn, and mangled.

torn by the stress and beat,

no stronger than the strips of sand

along your ragged beach. (11-19)

Here, in the last two stanzas of the section, the r,” “sh,” “p,” and “k” sounds give way to softer sibilant “str” sounds, sonically enacting a grinding of larger debris into finer grains of “sand” and “beach,” as if the gods are totally obliterated. The gods are so weakened nothing will “conjure” them, not even anger: “no whip of the tongue to anger you— / no hate of words / you must rise to refute” (8-10). There is indeed no hope.

But despite the hopelessness of the first section, the second section finds the speaker among other supplicants bringing offerings to the gods to call for their return. The five stanzas of the second section catalog the “great masses” of violets they bring. Recalling and concentrating the lush flower imagery of *Sea Garden* as a whole, the section qualifies the word “violets,” which appears at least a dozen times in the eighteen-line section, with vivid, textured, and fragrant descriptors: “blue,” “moss,” “cliff,” “gold,” “burnt,” “red ash,” deep-purple,” “bird-foot,” “sweet,” “bare,” “chill,” etc. The vibrant display is offered to resurrect the gods. The sonic effect is chant-like.

The third section emphatically foretells the triumphant return of the gods. Where the first section is structured around the refrain of hopelessness, and the second around the repetition of “violet,” the third section is structured around the refrain “you will come” and foresees the return of the gods’ power:

you will thunder along the cliff—

break—retreat—get fresh strength—

gather and pour weight upon beach. (45-47)

In the last stanza, the speaker reveals what the return of the gods means for humankind, the reason for the plea for their return:

For you will come,  
  
you will come,  
  
you will answer our taut hearts,  
  
you will break the lie of men's thoughts,  
  
and cherish and shelter us. (57-61)

The gods' return means human healing and protection. Their return will allow human survival similar to the plant-life survival we have seen in the flower poems of *Sea Garden*. The speaker's reverence to the gods allows for the gods' cherishing of the speaker. Although the speaker is a humble suppliant, she is boldly conjuring the gods, bringing back their power in order to resuscitate her own power.

Eileen Gregory identifies "Sea Gods" as one of several in *Sea Garden* that can be called a romantic "theophanic poem," a poem that calls for the return of the gods (83). Following Lawrence Kramer, Gregory asserts, "what the poet calls upon in summoning gods is her own power, through the poem, to transfigure the ordinary" (83). Gregory suggests that the prosody of the poem itself becomes a metonym of the gods' absence or presence and, correlatively, of the poet's strength: it begins with irregularity, the lines like the gods, "ragged. . . cut apart. . . misshapen. . . broken"; then increases in regularity and repetition, ending in a strong, willful assertion of the concluding part" (84). Thus,



the poet gains power through creating a poem that calls for and enacts the return of the gods' divine power. In calling on the gods, she is harnessing the power of the sea. This anticipates the shift in H.D.'s subsequent writing toward an increasing impetus to confront the divine forces that decree survival or death.

In both literary criticism and modernist culture, there have traditionally been powerful currents against personality. Friedman, echoing Pound and Eliot's impersonality, admonishes that we should not read H.D.'s imagist poetry in the context of her biography. I have shown that, while it seems on the surface that H.D. mostly eschews personality in her imagist poetry, the imagist poems of *Sea Garden* written around the time of and after H.D.'s 1915 pregnancy and stillbirth begin to admit the personal. Reading the 1915-1916 *Sea Garden* poems in the context of H.D.'s later autobiographical fiction reveals an intense scrutiny of the perfect eugenic body that, like H.D.'s stillborn daughter, is supposed to be alive and thriving, but is instead without breath. I argue that the bodies of *Sea Garden* mirror the body of the stillborn babe. Furthermore, these later *Sea Garden* poems break from lyric brevity and strive toward the epic, both in form and in mythic subject matter. I argue, then, that the epic and mythic is generated from the personal, and, in turn, that the personal is epic and mythic.

Although these poems do not explicitly deal with a gendered experience of birth from the mother's perspective, they begin to break apart the binaries of fecundity and death, self and other, and spiritual and physical, by thinking of such pairs as complexities rather than opposing forces. The rethinking of such binaries is not only a modernist move but also fundamental to new conceptions of pregnancy. In other words, these poems set

the stage for H.D.'s future attention to the birthing body. As we shall see in the next chapter, it is only after H.D.'s second pregnancy and the live birth of her daughter Perdita that she can take on female reproductive capacity as a theme.



Fig. 1<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>According to Hall, "Archive," this is "the design for the 'Eugenic family' extensively used on the Society's literature during the 1930s" (para. 8).

## CHAPTER 2

### **Unfit Mothers: Feminist Eugenics and the Birthing Body in H.D. and Loy**

“Where does the body come in? / What is the body?” asks H.D. at the end of *Notes on Thought and Vision*, a meditation on creativity, written only three months after the birth of her daughter, Perdita. That experience, where both H.D. and her daughter survive childbirth, prompted H.D. to write explicitly about the maternal body, creativity, and their connection to a larger humanity. Whereas in *Sea Garden* the maternal body was concealed and displaced by the body of the eugenic stillborn child, in *Notes* it is the central subject of meditation. As we have just seen, H.D. continued to process her 1915 traumatic stillbirth throughout the next four decades of her writing life.<sup>27</sup> In H.D.’s personal mythology, the 1919 live birth of Perdita allowed H.D. herself to be reborn after the stillbirth, and it paved the way for H.D. to deal with that birth trauma head-on in her later autobiographical fiction. More importantly, Perdita’s birth enabled H.D. to deal explicitly with the birthing body in her writing. In doing so, H.D. attempted to reconcile female sexual reproduction with creativity and birthing/mothering with writing by dismantling gender binaries that seek to ban mothers from cultural production. Through *Notes*, H.D. rethought eugenic philosophy as she theorized a different kind of mothering.

H.D. was not the only modernist poet to place the birthing body at the center of her writing. It is important to situate H.D.’s early bodily project with modernist poet and mother-of-four Mina Loy’s contemporaneous writing on female sexuality and the birthing body. Both H.D. and Loy responded to contemporary feminist and eugenic

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<sup>27</sup> The attempts we have seen in the previous chapter include *Asphodel*, written in 1921 and 1922; *Palimpsest*, written in 1923 and 1924; and finally *Bid Me to Live*, written on and off between 1939 and 1950.

thought, allowing the birthing body to inform their modernist work. Both modernist mother-poets used the language of eugenics ultimately to critique the mainstream eugenicist reduction of women to mere reproduction machines, decreeing that mothers must be racially pure, mentally fit, and heterosexual in order to reproduce their husband's equally pure and fit line and thereby rebuild society. However, their feminist projects took different forms. H.D. endeavored to disrupt gender binaries by moving toward a synthesis of gender roles that ultimately resulted in a disruption of heteronormative reproduction. Loy, on the other hand, insisted on sexual differentiation and emphasized women's reproductive differences as a source of power. Critical attention to both poets has focused on their relationship to feminism and on how being a woman may have shaped their writing, but birth as an actual bodily event within this larger thematic sphere has not been adequately considered.

Much of Loy's radical revision of womanhood centered on the body of the mother, which is not in itself alien to contemporary eugenic thought; however, the fact that Loy graphically made women's birthing and sexual bodies visible in her poetry, most notably in "Parturition," was groundbreaking in the early twentieth century and, in terms of birth in particular, still remains rare and innovative today. Unlike H.D., who concealed the body in her contemporaneous *Sea Garden* and who began to address the body conceptually in *Notes* a few years later, Loy unabashedly laid bare the birthing body in "Parturition." I argue that the innovative, modern feminist work of both H.D. and Loy came directly out of their bodily experiences as childbearing women. Both H.D. and Loy revised contemporary eugenic thought in order to radically redefine women's social roles and reconstruct women as whole creative human beings. However, where H.D.

constructed a polysexual mother figure to disrupt the gender binaries that constrict women's social position, Loy insisted on a biologically essential division of the sexes that was the basis of her radical feminism.

"Parturition," a poem about childbirth, does this through its graphic content and innovative form (Loy 4-8). Published in the year of H.D.'s first pregnancy and stillbirth, "Parturition," was, according to Roger Conover, "the putative first poem ever written about the physical experience of childbirth from the parturient woman's point of view, and the first poem in English to use collage as a texturing device" (Loy 177). Conover aptly calls Loy's poem "a significant event in the history of modern poetry as well as the literature of modern sexuality" (177). It is significant to note that the birth described in Loy's poem takes place at home rather than in the hospital. Loy wrote the poem in 1915, a decade after her last birth. Unlike H.D.'s births, which occurred in maternity homes attended by obstetricians, the birth described in Loy's poem did not take place at a hospital or maternity home, and if there was a medical attendant or midwife present at all, she is not mentioned in the poem.

"Parturition," rather, centers on the laboring woman's experience and consciousness. The poem begins, "I am the centre / Of a circle of pain" (1-2). It is crucial that these opening lines do not locate the speaker *at* the center of the circle of pain, but instead identifies the speaker *as* the center. In other words, the speaker is not merely encompassed by pain, a pain that is outside and separate from herself, but she *is* the nucleus of that pain. The distinction is important because the poem goes on to present the bodily experience of parturition as one that obliterates the boundaries of the body on

many levels. The poem not only blurs the distinction between the speaker's body and mind but also reveals the speaker's very being (body/mind) to be continuous with the larger cosmos. Thus, it is not only the "circle of pain" but also the speaker herself who exceeds her "boundaries in every direction." The first stanza continues with an attempt to situate the speaker in relation to outside objects and forces, but the blending of the speaker with the surrounding cosmos makes it impossible to differentiate internal from external:

Locate an irritation	without
It is	within
	Within
It is without.	(11-14)

These lines complete the first sentence of the poem. Whatever the "irritation," whether it is an external sound, scent, sensation, sight, or taste, it is also internal. And if it is an internal irritant—a thought, a memory, or a feeling, for example—it is also external. Spatial relations collapse for the parturient speaker. As other critics have noted, these four lines can be read horizontally or vertically, and even diagonally. The varied directionality of the lines enact the spatial flexibility and instability described by the speaker.

The final three lines of the third stanza reiterate the physical spatial scheme in psychological terms:

The sensitized area

Is identical with the extensity

Of intension (15-17)

The “sensitized area,” or the locale that experiences sensation, is already difficult to place in that the speaker, “the center of the circle of pain,” is collapsing in on herself and expanding outward so that her individual body, psyche, and identity become one with the cosmos. Is the sensitized area the speaker? Is it the core of the sensation of the labor contraction? Is it the entire cosmos? It is all of these: It is “identical with the extensity / Of intension,” which might mean the speaker’s perception of the entire span, or the expanding capacity, of her experience of intensifying sensation.<sup>28</sup> More specifically, it refers to both the quality and the quantity of the ever-proliferating sensation. Thus, the “sensitized area” is “identical,” one and the same as the expanding and intensifying sensation. A key feature of this first stanza that is worth highlighting is the collapse between the physical and the mental, as it extends throughout the poem. The fifth stanza can be read alongside the theories of labor pain proposed by contemporary obstetrician Grantly Dick-Reade, an early proponent of “natural” childbirth.

Pain is no stronger than the resisting force

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<sup>28</sup> “Extensity” is not just the quality of being extensive, according to the *OED*, but in psychological terms, it is “of the breadth of sensation”; that is, it refers to the mind’s ability to perceive the span of space. “Intension” is etymologically related to “extensity,” in that they both come from the Latin, “to stretch or strain,” but its meaning is even more complex. In general, it is synonymous with “intensity” or “intensification.” In psychological terms, it is our ability to sense intensity just as we can perceive extensity (as in “extension” above). The *OED* tells us that in logic (and in linguistics), intension refers to the “internal quantity or content of a notion or concept, the sum of the attributes contained in it; the number of qualities connoted by a term.” It is the opposite of extension, which refers to the number of *objects* a concept refers to.



Pain calls up in me

The struggle is equal (24-26)

In *Childbirth Without Fear*, Dick-Read put forth his theory that many advocates of physiological birth still follow today; namely, that the pain of labor is intensified by the psychological fear of the pain that women imagine and experience. Fear leads to tension, which leads to an intensification of physical pain. This is known as the “fear-tension-pain cycle.” Dick-Read developed his theories based on his observation of women in his obstetrics practice in the period when Loy was writing about birth. Loy’s third stanza intuitively Dick-Read’s theory of the fear-tension-pain cycle. The physical pain experienced by the laboring speaker is equal to the “resisting force,” the tension, which the pain produces. The “struggle” is thus between two equal forces, one mental, one physical.

The sixth stanza abruptly cuts for the first time in the poem to a space that is, at first glance, apparently separate from and outside of the speaker:

The open window is full of a voice

A fashionable portrait painter

Running upstairs to a woman’s apartment

Sings (27-30)

But the shift is not so much from internal to external as it is from physical (the struggle between the sensation of pain and the speaker’s physical reaction to it) to the mental. The fourth stanza’s opening lines that seemingly describe an external scene only rise out of an

external sound, the singing voice from the stairs. But the language here places what should be external sounds (coming from a separate person, outside the apartment, on the stairs of the apartment building) within the psyche of the speaker. The “voice” does not come *through* the “open window”; rather, the “open window is *full of* a voice” (emphasis mine). The voice is within the space of the window. The voice “[s]ings” a popular, ribald song, its lines quoted in the middle of the stanza: “At the back of the thoughts to which I permit crystallization” (35). In other words, the voice, which is contained within the open window, sings in close proximity to (“at the back of”) the speaker’s *internal* “thoughts.” Not only are the speaker’s thoughts internal, but they are thoughts for which she actively “permit[s] crystallization.” These thoughts include what the speaker describes in the last four lines of the stanza:

The conception

Brute

Why?

The irresponsibility of the male

Leaves woman her superior Inferiority (36-39)

The voice, the song, the crystallized thoughts all exist within the speaker’s internal mental cosmos.

Tara Prescott notes that the usual critical reading of these lines takes the portrait painter as “Loy’s first husband (Stephen Haweis, a painter and photographer who cheated on Loy), running upstairs for a sexual tryst while his mate suffers alone in childbirth” (202). Prescott takes issue with this reading for relying too much on “biographical

background,” and proposes an alternate, more symbolic reading of these lines: “The man in the poem,” Prescott argues, “does not need to be related to the speaker at all; instead, his presence in the poem acts as a symbol of manhood and the social and biological freedoms that accompany it” (202). But both the biographical reading and Prescott’s more general sociological, symbolic reading are compatible possibilities. And one can read these lines another way, too, which brings together both readings. If these actions are occurring in the speaker’s internal world, if they are in her mind, the singing painter could be Howe and the woman upstairs could be Loy herself; that is, the lines could be a memory of the conception that leads the speaker to this moment. In any of these interpretations, Prescott’s point that the portrait-painter’s actions start “a chain reaction” leads his lover “to the ‘unpredicted Maternity’ that afflicts the speaker of the poem. The man, however, can afford his ‘irresponsibility’, since it is women who pay the physical and social price for sexual encounters”—a central problem addressed in “Feminist Manifesto” as well (202).

The next stanza compares the image of the young man “running up-stairs” to meet his lover with the physical sensation of experiencing labor contractions, which the speaker likens to “climbing a distorted mountain of agony” (40, 41). The man’s carefree ascent and lighthearted freedom of movement in the previous stanza is in direct opposition to the speaker’s arduous ascent in this stanza. Loy’s mountain-climbing metaphor precisely describes the physical sensation and mental perception of labor. The speaker climbs and “reache[s] the summit,” but only “[i]ncidentally,” as if it happens to her, without her own will, or “with the exhaustion of control” (43, 42, 42). The speaker’s sense of control is exhausted or emptied out. She is both actively “climbing” and also

being uncontrollably pushed along by the overwhelming force of the contractions. Just as she reaches the summit, she “gradually subside[s] into anticipation of / Repose / Which never comes” (44-46). The line breaks enact the pauses in which the laboring speaker first anticipates a moment of rest after a difficult contraction and just before she immediately begins to experience the next difficult contraction. During the “transition stage” of labor, when the cervix is dilated to around eight centimeters, contractions can last up to two minutes with only a brief fifteen to thirty seconds or less of rest in between. As this occurs in late active labor right before the baby is ready to be born (ten centimeters, or the size of the baby’s head, is full dilation when the birthing mother is ready to push the baby out), a woman at this stage has likely already been laboring for several hours. This is the point of exhaustion, where the laboring woman typically feels she cannot go on, even if up to this point she has been coping and managing her labor well. The contractions are relentless in this short period of labor, as this stanza vividly describes. “Repose. . . never comes” (45-46):

For another mountain is growing up

Which                    goaded by the unavoidable

I must traverse

Traversing myself (47-50)

Again, in these lines, the speaker is “goaded,” pushed on by the “unavoidable” force of her contractions, reiterating a simultaneously active and passive position. The final line makes clear how this might be. In climbing and crossing this “distorted mountain of

agony,” the speaker is “[t]ravailing” *herself* (42, 50). Just as in the first stanza, where the speaker and the cosmos become one and the same, the speaker here is shown to be the powerful mountainous force relentlessly rising up, demanding to be traversed. Once more, a large, external element, here a geological marvel, turns out to be a metaphor for the speaker herself. That is, the power attributed to this “distorted mountain of agony,” this sublime pain, is the speaker’s own power. Thus, the previously discussed lines of the fifth stanza, “Pain is no stronger than the resisting force / Pain calls up in me,” resonate, suggesting that the sensations of labor that the speaker experiences are no more powerful than herself. In fact, the overwhelming sensation of labor *is* her power.

A shift occurs in the next stanza, which centers on the transformation of the speaker’s “sensitivity” (52). As she continues through labor and her physical perception intensifies, her mental perception becomes distorted to the point where she undergoes a kind of out-of-body experience:

Something in the delirium of night hours

Confuses while intensifying sensitivity

Blurring spatial contours

So aiding elusion of the circumscribed

That the gurgling of a crucified wild beast

Comes from so far away

And the foam on the stretched muscles of a mouth

Is no part of myself (51-58)

She can no longer associate herself with her experience of the sensations of labor. Her “sensibility” separates her self from the “crucified wild beast,” which is “gurgling” and sounding as if from afar. The “delirium,” confusion, and “[b]lurring” here is similar to the spatial blurring of boundaries that opens the poem. This delirium facilitates the “elusion of the circumscribed.” If the speaker is the circumscribed, her delirium aids an escape from herself. The boundaries of her circumscribed body are an illusion. She is confused and deluded into thinking that this primal experience is not in fact happening to her. The “foam on the stretched muscles” are not on *her* mouth, but on *a* mouth. Not only is this mouth not perceived by the speaker to be her own, but it is also not clear if it is a mouth on the face or a vaginal mouth. It could be either or both.

The final section of this stanza reiterates and emphasizes the displacement of the speaker's sensibility:

There is a climax in sensibility

When pain surpassing itself

Becomes exotic

And the ego succeeds in unifying the positive and

negative poles of sensation [see original for lineation]

Uniting the opposing and resisting forces

In lascivious revelation (59-65)

When pain becomes so great that it “surpass[es] itself,” it “[b]ecomes exotic,” unfamiliar, unlike itself. It may be surprising that it is now the “ego” that “succeeds in unifying the positive and negative poles of sensation,” since the ego has up to this point been displaced and diffuse. But what is more surprising still is the conclusion of this stanza, which alludes to a female experience that is rarely discussed in literature or elsewhere, that of orgasmic birth. The stanza concludes with a uniting of the “opposing and resisting forces” that have been referred to frequently in this poem, culminating in “lascivious revelation.” The sensations of labor described by the speaker cannot simply be reduced to the negative concept of pain. There are “positive and negative poles of sensation” and “opposing and resisting forces” that result in a paradoxically pleasurable release: “lascivious revelation.” Adrienne Rich, in *Of Woman Born*, points out the pregnant and birthing woman’s capacity for sexual pleasure and orgasmic birth:

During pregnancy the entire pelvic area increases in its vascularity (the production of arteries and veins) thus increasing the capacity for sexual tension and greatly increasing the frequency and intensity of orgasm.

During pregnancy, the system is flooded with hormones, which not only induce growth of new blood vessels but increase clitoral responsiveness and strengthen the muscles effective in orgasm. A woman who has given birth has a biologically increased capacity for genital pleasure, unless her pelvic organs have been damaged obstetrically, as frequently happens.

Many women experience orgasm for the first time after childbirth, or become erotically aroused while nursing. Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, Niles

Newton, Masters and Johnson, and others have documented the erotic sensations experienced by women in actually giving birth. (183)

Rich goes on to suggest that female and, especially, maternal sexuality is not culturally condoned, and therefore never talked about.<sup>29</sup> This is still the case, more than three decades after Rich's book was first written, and a century after Loy's poem appeared.

The speaker's orgasmic release at the end of the sixth stanza, and the "[r]elaxation" that follows it, is the only indication that the birth has happened (66). There is no mention of a baby being born. Instead, the next stanza resumes with the return of the speaker's mental life. In her repose, she can now contemplate the powerful experience she has just undergone and gain a deeper and richer understanding of her own place in the cosmos and her power as a birthing mother. The second half of the poem is a meditation that centers on the interplay between life and death. The speaker is transformed. Her understanding of life far surpasses her social position that sees her as a "superior Inferior" (39). She now transcends that role:

Mother I am

Identical

With infinite Maternity

.....

The was—is—ever—shall—be

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<sup>29</sup> Many have never heard of and can scarcely imagine orgasmic birth as being a real possibility, much less something that has occurred in roughly 20% of the unimpeded normal physiological births attended by American midwife Ina May Gaskin. See Debra Pascali Bonaro's documentary *Orgasmic Birth*.



### Of cosmic reproductivity (98-106)

She is one with the larger, timeless cosmos. The following two stanzas—the antepenultimate and penultimate of the poem—present us with images of animal and insect life and death: a cat and nursing “blind kittens,” a “small animal carcass,” “insects.” The speaker is one with these living beings (“I am that cat”); she is part of “that same undulation of living” and also something much larger:

Death

Life

I am knowing

All about

### Unfolding (119-123)

Birth makes her omniscient. She exceeds all boundaries, even beyond life and death. She is divine. The final stanza culminates in the juxtaposition of the “woman-of-the-people / Wearing a halo / A ludicrous little halo” and God (128-130). Given the transformation of the speaker into a divine figure, the final three lines, “I once heard in a church / —Man and woman God made them— / Thank God,” must be read as ironic (132-134). Women, whether the working women cleaning up after the birth (“Doing hushed service”) or the birthing woman herself, are assigned to the lowest social position (127). Traditional patriarchal thought may praise or martyr them for their role in childbirth, and eugenic thought may claim to elevate their status in the service of race regeneration, but they are

still fundamentally confined to their prescribed roles. Loy's "Parturition" ends with a radically subversive implication that God does not make humankind; women do through the bodily work of childbirth. There is only the primordial power of birth by women that has been harnessed, controlled, and usurped by patriarchal culture and religion.

After H.D.'s second birth in 1919, she took on themes similar to those found in Loy's "Parturition." *Notes on Thought and Vision* considers the female capacity for creativity that comes out of female reproductive power. Whereas Loy's poem describes a totally natural home birth, H.D.'s *Notes* is based on a birth experience that is shaped by obstetric anesthesia. Due to her 1915 birth trauma, H.D. may have gone into her second birth with fear and apprehension. She therefore may have sought a maternity home offering obstetric anesthesia.<sup>30</sup> A 1925 ad for St. Faith's Nursing Home in *The Times* classifieds overtly announces the use of twilight sleep for its maternity patients:

ST FAITH'S NURSING HOME, EALING W.5. Est. 32 years. All cases.

Separate house for MATERNITY, TWILIGHT SLEEP or other. Resident Physician. Own Doctor can attend. Quiet. Good Garden. Moderate fees.

Tel. Ealing 1485. Ealing Broadway four minutes. (qtd. in Barnett 313)

Although by 1919, twilight sleep in particular had seemed to fall out of favor in London due to increasing reports of unwanted side effects like "extreme agitation," "violence," and "delirium" in the mother, and asphyxiation and death of the infant (Wolf 66-68),

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<sup>30</sup> According to the Silverstein chronology, Brigit Patmore helped find St. Faith's for H.D. during her third trimester. At the time, H.D. was already living in Ealing, so perhaps this particular home was chosen simply based on location. But H.D.'s choice suggests that she did not associate the catastrophic negative side effects of ether, chloroform, and twilight sleep—namely, neonate asphyxia—with the stillbirth of her firstborn. We have already seen that H.D. took on the burden of blame for the stillbirth that the staff at Prince's Gate lay on her shoulders.

often small maternity homes like St. Faith's, driven by patient demand, offered twilight sleep even (or especially) when hospitals abandoned its use due to its significant negative side effects.<sup>31</sup> It is significant that H.D. would have chosen a maternity home offering twilight sleep because it suggests she wanted to avoid a fully conscious birth due to the birth trauma she experienced four years before. Her choice to birth at a facility offering twilight sleep shows not only that she did not connect her stillbirth with the obstetric anesthesia used but also more generally that women were still choosing twilight sleep in the late teens after over a decade of negative reports in medical journals about its catastrophic side effects.<sup>32</sup> This attests to the widespread cultural fear of childbirth and the growing faith in medical obstetrics that is inversely proportional to a belief in women's reproductive power, as described by Loy's "Parturition." Whereas Loy's poem comes out of an experience of unmedicated ("natural") childbirth, H.D.'s *Notes* comes out of a birth experience that was most likely under the influence of twilight sleep.

Twilight sleep was still unregulated and experimental; however, despite its documented negative side effects, it could, paradoxically, allow a birthing mother to have a relatively normal physiological or "natural" birth, preventing the use of forceps and other surgical delivery methods.<sup>33</sup> This meant much quicker recovery but no memory of

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<sup>31</sup> Medical historian Richard Barnett offers a history of the use of twilight sleep in twentieth-century Britain through a "citation analysis," or a review of the frequency of which the term and its synonyms were used in *The Time* and *The Lancet* throughout the twentieth century. Barnett's analysis shows that the frequency of the use of the term in the popular press rose exponentially from 1915 through the end of the 1920s and then saw a sharp decline in the 1930s. The term was not cited as frequently or as late in the medical journals. Barnett concludes that most of the demand for twilight sleep, then, was popular rather than medical, or as previously noted, patient-driven. He notes the difficulty in excavating the history of twilight sleep in Britain because more recent medical practitioners and historians regard it "as an embarrassing anomaly in the history of pain relief in labour, and for this reason it is marginalized or ignored completely" (313).

<sup>32</sup> In fact, the use of twilight sleep continued to be widespread in the U.S. and Britain for decades after despite known negative effects. See Wolf.

<sup>33</sup> See Plummer, "Notes on 100" 338-339.

actually having given birth. In a 1926 *Lancet* article propounding the virtues of twilight sleep, the medical superintendent of St. Faith's, Dr. Edgar Curnow Plummer, reveals what a typical birth there might have been like.<sup>34</sup> Plummer explains that the administration of twilight sleep to St. Faith's birthing mothers was individually tailored and closely supervised—two necessities for safety that made twilight sleep impractical for most hospitals seeking to systematize birth ("Notes on 100" 338, 339). He notes that in addition to morphine and scopolamine, he routinely administered chloroform to his patients during the pushing stage of labor and right before actual delivery so that the mother would sleep through it, even if scopolamine was recently administered and she would not remember the second stage (pushing). This way she would not feel the pain of pushing. In addition to minimizing the mother's conscious experience of the birth, Plummer regarded "this sleep as a very important factor in attaining complete amnesia" (338). But it is important to highlight that the use of these drugs for childbirth, as Plummer's articles make clear, was still experimental in 1919, and doctors could not fully control how patients would react to the drugs or whether they would work at all.<sup>35</sup> Some

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<sup>34</sup> Although H.D.'s confinement at St. Faith's was seven years before the publication of this article, Plummer notes that many of the mothers in his 1926 study were repeat patients who had previously had T.S. in the home from two to nine years ago," showing that similar practices were used in the home during H.D.'s 1919 confinement ("Notes on 100" 339).

<sup>35</sup> Plummer describes the effects of twilight sleep on patients and notes how he managed adverse psychotropic reactions such as delirium and hallucinations by "ensuring quiet" and providing blindfolds for some mothers. He does note that a small number of patients became excited, trying to get out of bed, but quite unconscious of their surroundings" ("Notes on 100" 338). More scopolamine and/or chloroform would be given to control these cases. And a handful of patients did not sleep under the influence of the medications and instead, "talked irreverently and disconnectedly most of the time, and fancied their relatives and friends were there with them" ("Notes on 100" 338). Plummer amusedly reports these cases of delirium and hallucination and suggests they pose no cause for alarm. The aim of his method of twilight sleep is to ensure amnesia and not analgesia, and he describes his patients as half-consciously experiencing all the sensations of contractions: they "stir uneasily, groan, and possibly complain of the pain, falling asleep again directly after the pain passed," which is incidentally not unlike unmedicated labor when the birthing mother is coping well. The difference with twilight sleep is that the mother would not be able to remember any of it. The amnesia was so complete in most cases that "it was quite usual for both primiparae

of the patients, Plummer concedes, retained partial memories of the birth experience (338).<sup>36</sup>

Some patients exposed to multiple doses of scopolamine could later experience flashback hallucinations months or years after exposure. It is possible, then, that H.D.'s subsequent life-changing hallucinatory experiences—the “jelly-fish” vision she experienced in July 1919 and described in *Notes on Thought and Vision*, and the writing-on-the-wall experience she had in Corfu in 1920 and described in *Tribute to Freud*—could be directly related to her 1919 birth. Even if H.D.'s hallucinations were not directly induced by a previous exposure to scopolamine, the experience of birthing under the influence of twilight sleep and possibly chloroform, especially with only partial amnesia, can be read as a metaphorical reference to the jelly-fish vision described in *Notes*, a vision centered on the interconnectedness of the body, mind, and higher consciousness

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and multiparae to say they could hardly realize the baby was theirs, and that they had lost from a few hours to two or more days of time” (“Notes on 100” 338).

<sup>36</sup> Plummer attributes any negative outcomes to the cases that ended up requiring more invasive medical intervention, and he does not link the need for these interventions to the use of twilight sleep. Although he says that the babies “were not affected harmfully,” he notes that resuscitation was required for three babies (or 3%) for “shock (‘white asphyxia’)” (339). One of the cases was after a long fifty-five-hour labor, and the other two after “difficult forceps extractions with considerable chloroform” (339). All three babies survived. He continues, “There was no other case of greater severity than some sluggishness of breathing for a short time—oligopnoea” (339). It is not clear in how many cases this oligopnoea occurred. A footnote to this section goes on to note seven infant deaths or stillbirths, which he refers to as “abnormalities” (339). Plummer attributes these deaths to factors outside his control, including two cases of malpresentation (breech), one case of premature twins who apparently died in utero before the onset of labor, one case of severe neural tube defects (“anencephalic monster”), and two cases where he blames maternal factors like “Primipara aged 40, unhealthy with pyorrhea” and “Primipara very small build” (339). It is worth noting that although breech position and the maternal factors he describes could put a birth at higher risk for complications, they may not necessarily be the cause of fetal distress or death. Although Plummer was clearly enthusiastic about twilight sleep and had relatively good outcomes overall, his study was not particularly well designed and could not control for all variables, especially because the dosage and timing of drug administration varied in each case. In a 1928 letter to *The British Medical Journal*, Plummer explains his method for limiting “white asphyxia” of the newborn by only giving morphine early in labor so that it wears off by the time the baby is born. He notes other studies that support the notion that morphine intoxications were a cause of asphyxia: “[R]ecords show much less oligopnoea since the use of the second dose of morphine was discontinued” (“White Asphyxia” 1194).

that she used as the basis for her theories of poetic creativity. Just as twilight sleep could allow a birthing mother to lose her inhibitions and experience a physiologically normal, non-surgical birth, the conception of the alternate consciousness of the jelly-fish vision could give H.D. access to her body in a way that her previous traumatic birth experience did not allow. In this way, the poetics H.D. was beginning to develop through her writing of *Notes* may have come directly from her altered consciousness and bodily experience of her 1919 birth.

Donna Hollenberg, one of the few to pay sustained attention to childbirth in H.D.'s work, suggests that *Notes on Thought and Vision* represents H.D.'s articulation of "a theory of creativity based on the emotional issues arising from her trauma in childbirth," and she suggests that both the 1915 stillbirth and the 1919 birth of Perdita were traumatic events (19).<sup>37</sup> She recounts the critical consensus that H.D.'s second pregnancy was "near-fatal," and "in the course of which she lost most of the significant men in her life" (20). I want to suggest that although these aspects of the pregnancy are a fundamental part of the H.D. mythology, a closer look at H.D.'s letters to Bryher at the time suggests that critics may have blown this mythology out of proportion. While it is true that H.D. disconnected from her heterosexual community, which was centered on her marriage to Aldington and her friendships with Pound and Lawrence, she was also active in building a new female-centered support system through her relationships with Bryher

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<sup>37</sup> Hollenberg argues that H.D.'s stillbirth problematizes the childbirth metaphor for H.D., as she takes on the guilt and blame for the loss (74). She argues that H.D. is ambivalent about female reproductive power after her stillbirth. In her reading of H.D.'s early work, Hollenberg sees a shift in H.D.'s post-*Sea Garden* poems written at Corfe Castle in 1917, in which H.D. "represents creative power as masculine in a way that reveal the pain of self-division" (74). As I have already shown in chapter 1, as early as the 1915 and 1916 poems of *Sea Garden* H.D. begins to carve out a space for the stillbirth and its implications in her work.

and Brigit Patmore around the time of her second pregnancy and birth.<sup>38</sup> While Hollenberg concedes that “H.D. began to explore the imaginative implications of childbirth at [this] psychological turning point,” she argues that H.D.’s representation of creativity as masculine was a result of her birth trauma.<sup>39</sup>

Counter to Hollenberg, I see H.D.’s second pregnancy as affirmative, rather than damaging, in the face of such personal turmoil, and this is precisely what allowed her to connect creativity and female reproduction in a positive way. This breakthrough in H.D.’s ability to make these connections between poetry, birth and maternal power was not a complete departure from her work in *Sea Garden*.<sup>40</sup> It was rather a transformation of the same themes. The central image in *Notes*, the jelly-fish, an inhabitant of the sea garden, is particularly significant. Unlike the battered bodies of sea plants and dead bodies of the lost beloved, the jelly-fish becomes part of the structure of the poet’s body. The unity of the body/mind/over-mind structure in this vision was directly related to H.D.’s new conception of an integrated female sexuality that centered on maternity. But what was especially innovative in H.D.’s approach was how it complicated gender essentialism by integrating not just the female but the male as well. Because the pregnant body was not a stable singular being but one body always becoming more than one, the maternal body could incorporate, literally and figuratively, both genders and as such

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<sup>38</sup> Hollenberg notes that H.D.’s increasing turn to women for lesbian relationships in this period is a direct result of her fear of pregnancy after the stillbirth (20).

<sup>39</sup> Because her argument is based on the assumption that H.D. was completely victimized by the abandonment by her heterosexual community, Hollenberg does not seem to be quite certain what to make of *Notes*. She, rather defensively, points out its “defensive quality,” “overheated language,” and “crude literalness,” although she grants that H.D.’s defensiveness is in response to the still-prevalent “prejudices against intellectual women,” which were common, too, in “Victorian medical circles” and were “based on the theory that women’s reproductive functions diverted creative energy from the brain and vice versa” (22).

<sup>40</sup> Neither is it a complete departure from the Corfe Castle poems Hollenberg focuses on in her book.

destabilized the notion of mutually exclusive genders. H.D.'s conception of creativity was then not simply masculine or feminine, but a composite. H.D. devised a modern conception of creativity based on an experience of pregnancy and birth that problematized traditional binaries.

Twilight sleep birth implicitly calls into question the notion of a Cartesian mind-body split, and in *Notes*, H.D. implicitly critiques Cartesian dualisms such as this that found traditional gender binaries that constrict her socially, creatively, and professionally.<sup>41</sup> As Albert Galpi's introduction to the City Lights edition of *Notes* points out, H.D.'s text is "filled with dualisms that seem to split experience at all levels. . . . But the impulse behind 'Notes' is to account for those mysterious moments in which the polarities seem to fall away, or—more accurately—to find their contradictions lifted and subsumed into a gestalt that illuminated the crosspatch of the past and released her to the chances of the future" (12). One way she did this was by continually introducing a third term to the traditional binary structures. For example, she opened *Notes* with "Three states or manifestations of life: body, mind, and over-mind" (17). By introducing the third term, "over-mind," H.D. from the start destabilized the notion of the Cartesian mind/body divide.<sup>42</sup>

For H.D., the mind and body are interconnected along with the over-mind, rather than being discrete entities divided and hierarchically gendered. All three are equal in relation to one another. She describes the over-mind as a "cap of consciousness over my

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<sup>41</sup> This predates, by about half a century, more recent, similar critiques by such feminist theorists as Sherry Ortner in "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture" and Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*.

<sup>42</sup> This is a practice she introduces here and continues throughout her writing life. *Trilogy*, for example is founded on the principle of the third contravening term that disrupts strict binaries and introduces the notion of the proliferating multiple.



head, my forehead, affecting a little my eyes” (18). It is “like water, transparent, fluid yet with definite body, contained in a definite space” (18-19). The over-mind encompasses the poet and moves her into a different state of consciousness and vision: “Sometimes when I am in that state of consciousness, things about me appear slightly blurred as if seen under water” (18). She continues, “Ordinary things never become quite unreal nor disproportionate. It is only an effort to readjust, to focus, seemingly a slight physical effort” (18). She calls this vision her “jelly-fish vision,” because this specialized consciousness is like a jelly-fish with “long feelers that reached down and through the body” (19). They are like an intricate network tapped into the nervous system:

There is, then, a set of super-feelings. These feelings extend out and about us; as the long, floating tentacles of the jelly-fish reach out and about him. They are not of different material, extraneous to the gray matter of the directing brain. The super-feelers are part of the super-mind as the jelly-fish feelers are part of the jelly-fish itself, elongated in fine threads. (19)

These “feelers” are an extension of the brain that extend both *through* and *about* the body, and are also *of* the body. Each element is a necessary part to a unified whole—so the body, rather than being subordinated to and separate from the mind, is a necessary part of the entire being. In H.D.’s configuration, “the brain and the womb are both centers of consciousness, equally important” (21).

H.D.’s awareness of over-mind was conducive to her creativity. And her creativity, rather than being at odds with her physical body’s ability to reproduce, was interconnected with it. Her awareness of the body gave rise to her awareness of the over-

mind and its connections: “I first realized this state of consciousness in my head. I visualize it just as well, now centered in the love-region of the body or placed like a foetus in the body” (19). This specialized consciousness is not just metaphorically like a fetus in the womb, but it also only comes to be conceptualized by H.D. through her pregnancy and birth: “For me,” H.D. asserts, “it was before the birth of my child that the jelly-fish consciousness seemed to come definitely into the field or realm of the intellect and brain” (20). The physical experience of H.D.’s birth allowed her a breakthrough in creativity and consciousness. For this reason, she wondered if the resulting kind of thought was “easier for a woman to attain. . . than for a man” or if it could equally be centered not in a woman’s womb, but in the “corresponding love-region of a man’s body” (20). Still, she explicitly connects women’s physical reproductive capabilities with this specialized creative consciousness. It is not just the brain, but “the love-brain” in the womb and “the over-brain” above the head that “are both capable of thought,” too. But this specialized “thought is vision” (22).

Like H.D.’s proposals about women, childbirth and creativity in *Notes*, Loy’s view of women in her “Feminist Manifesto” embraces mothering as a part of female sexuality that is not only compatible with but also generative of artistic creativity. Written in November 1914 as a direct response to F. T. Marinetti’s “Futurist Manifesto,” which celebrates masculinity, technology, war, and, infamously, “scorn for women.” Loy’s manifesto offers a series of radical proposals about women and feminism. For example, writing against the “man made bogey of virtue” or “the fictitious value of woman as identified with her physical purity” that she asserts is responsible for women’s subjugation, Loy proposes “the unconditional surgical destruction of virginity through-

out the female population at puberty—” as a way of dismantling the social restrictions on women (154-5). This is perhaps her most outrageous proposition, and critics have been quick to point out its unrealistic and unethical effects. Loy’s language—the “unconditional surgical” removal of the hymen—comes directly out of a contemporary culture of eugenics. Such a proposal is reminiscent of the much-debated social scheme of compulsory sterilization for the “unfit”—more often than not performed on women. Loy’s use of such language has raised more than a few critical eyebrows.

The “Feminist Manifesto” is indeed a controversial piece and has been read by critics as evidence of Loy’s racist, eugenic beliefs. Aimee Pozorski, among other critics, has argued that Loy’s manifesto “fails such a commitment” to women as world builders “by emphasizing race responsibility. Even as she defends mother’s rights, Loy’s unpublished autobiographical fiction voices racist attitudes that she encountered in her own mixed family background” (44). However, Lara Vetter reads the same unpublished fiction and takes issues with Pozorski’s reading and suggests that Pozorski’s “argument for Loy as racist eugenicist hinges chiefly on the line in. . . ‘Feminist Manifesto’ which argues that ‘every woman of superior intelligence should realize her race-responsibility by producing children in adequate proportion to the unfit or degenerate members of her sex’” (59n5). What precedes this oft-quoted notorious line, is the oft-left out but crucial antecedent, “Every woman has a right to maternity—” (Loy 155). A return to this preceding line gives credence to an opposing argument about Loy’s politics, that while her manifesto uses that language of eugenics, it does so in a way that subverts mainstream eugenic ideals. We cannot read Loy’s eugenics as 100% uncomplicatedly progressive, but some of her statements in “Feminist Manifesto” call on the reader to

question and critique the eugenic mainstream. If “Every woman has a right to maternity,” that includes those deemed “unfit” or “degenerate”: the more closely we read “Feminist Manifesto,” the more we must wonder who exactly is unfit and degenerate.

Furthermore, conservative eugenicists of the period might well have considered the scandalous Loy herself to fit into the category of degeneracy. This is partly why her writing was considered so controversial at the time. As the half-Jewish mother of four children, each fathered by a different man, and as a visual artist and poet, Loy did not fall into the traditional category of respectable womanhood. Pozorski points to Conover’s argument in his introduction to Loy’s *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* and in “(Re)Introducing Mina Loy,” that “Loy’s readers ‘were suspicious and binary in their thinking. . . . They preferred to see a woman express herself as one type of genius, or not at all. Better to be a poet, painter, actress, designer than to be all of them at once. Better to be a mother *or* a wife than a lover *and* a wife” (52). Conover’s point is that “Loy’s controversial critical reception. . . functioned more as an attack on how she mothered than on how she wrote” (52).<sup>43</sup> Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto,” therefore, challenges the very traditional notions of womanhood and motherhood that her readers and critics accuse her of failing to inhabit. But this is the very point of her argument in her manifesto: “The first illusion it is to your interest to demolish is the division of women into two classes the mistress, & the mother every well-balanced and developed woman knows that is not true, Nature has endowed

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<sup>43</sup> However, how she wrote was often derided as evidence of her “degenerate” sexuality and “unfit” mothering. For example, Paul Peppis outlines the reception of Loy’s *Love Songs* when it appears in 1915 in “Alfred Kreymborg’s avant-garde little magazine *Others*, which was conceived of as a more radical alternative to Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry*. Initially decried and derided as degenerate and pornographic, *Love Songs* is deemed ‘erotic and erratic’ (*New York Sun*, 21 August 1915), ‘swill poetry,’ and even ‘Hoggerel’ (*New York Tribune*, 3 July 1915)” (Peppis 563).

the complete woman with a faculty for expressing herself through all her functions” (154). Through her focus on a more holistic female sexuality, Loy proposes woman as a well-rounded being with agency and power. It is woman-as-human-being who is responsible for her version of eugenic world-building. In other words, “Feminist Manifesto” offers a radical revision of race and gender in the service of a subverted eugenics.

Counter to arguments about the inherent racism in the manifesto, Vetter reads Loy’s eugenic beliefs as subversive and complicated (while still problematic to be sure). She ‘takes “‘race-responsibility’ to mean responsibility for the human race” and suggests that “Loy is advocating a version of eugenics based not in ethnicity or race but in intelligence” (59n5). Vetter’s larger argument is that, unlike many of her contemporaries, “Loy posited racial purification as an obstacle to spiritual evolution. . . . Moreover, Loy models her notions of biological and spiritual evolution on one akin to that of the widely held notion of the ‘Cosmopolitan Jew’—a human so highly evolved as to be immune to ‘ailments’ ranging from physical disease to nationalism” (48).<sup>44</sup> In this way Loy recasts eugenics as a social scheme that values ethnic mixing, and proposes the Cosmopolitan Jew as an emblematic human ideal, much like H.D.’s Meleager. Following Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s argument for a “‘valorize[d]’ and ‘mongrelized aesthetic’” that “‘becomes Loy’s own version of modernism,” Vetter argues that Loy’s “contention that

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<sup>44</sup> Vetter is suggesting here that Loy subverts the construction of the rootless, cosmopolitan Jew that was commonly used as the basis for anti-Semitic attacks by making the cosmopolitan figure the ideal.

race is an illusory category of identity manifest only in a lower evolutionary stage in human development, set her apart from many of her contemporaries” (49).<sup>45</sup>

Womanhood and motherhood, too, as narrowly defined as it has been by patriarchal society, is a detriment to human development. Loy’s alternative complex womanhood is the means to progressive evolution. In order to change the world, we must change how we construct women. Her proposal that “[w]oman must become more responsible for the child than man” comes not from a traditional belief in biological determinism, that women are natural mothers and therefore should be the caretakers of offspring, but from a radical rejection of heteronormative monogamous marriage where both wife and children are the property of the husband/father. She argues against long-term monogamous relationships, warning women to “destroy in themselves, the desire to be loved,” which results in their subscription to marriage and subjugation. She is, therefore, proposing a radical idea of motherhood where the child belongs not to the father but to the mother, and is the result, as stated above, of the mother’s “psychic development” and not primarily the fleeting sexual union of the child’s conception (155). Thus, Loy’s problematic use of eugenic language is in the service of a radically progressive view about women and ethnic minorities—the “unfit” and “degenerate”—as full citizens responsible for regenerating the human race. Even her proposal of compulsory surgical hymen-removal, which so astonishes, is in the service of radically redefining womanhood. This is such a drastic proposal that one wants to read it as ironic; however, she seems to be totally serious, which suggests that only drastic measures are

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<sup>45</sup> See also Loy’s “mongrel” based on her own family life in her satiric “Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose” as well as her celebration of American English’s “mongrel vitality.” Cf Vetter.

appropriate for such a drastically unacceptable situation. Her ultimate argument is that only such a redefinition, “in defiance of superstition that there is nothing impure in sex—except in mental attitude to it—will constitute an incalculable & wider social regeneration than it is possible for our generation to imagine” (156).

H.D.’s *Notes* also uses the language of eugenics, but this has received less critical attention. We can look at H.D.’s use of eugenics through the same critical debate that has been applied to Loy’s work. H.D.’s theories in *Notes* also come out of the cultural influence of eugenics that had surrounded her since the time of her first birth and her connection with Mary Scharlieb and the PCWRC (as already detailed in chapter 1). H.D. was also directly influenced by Havelock Ellis, who was an important figure in her life in the late 1910s. He was key in the development of H.D.’s relationship with Bryher, which began at the start of her second pregnancy. As a supporter of feminist issues and causes, Ellis’s brand of eugenics was considered liberal and even progressive compared to the mainstream.<sup>46</sup> While there is a distinct eugenic thread running through *Notes*, H.D.

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<sup>46</sup> Reading the 1913 “roster of American and British women distinguished for their social activism and artistic creativity,” *Women as World Builders* by journalist Floyd Dell, Bruce Clarke notes how “some early-twentieth-century male progressives [came to] embrace the feminist movement” (12-13). Ellis was the quintessential example of such a male progressive: “The “evolutionary science” of the Whitmanian body, denuded of hierarchy and shame, and the Spencerian body, achieving a greater “fitness” through its developmental differentiations, has allowed the woman = body allegory of Western patriarchy to be reread as a positive rather than negative equation. Through Isadora Duncan, Dell echoes the evolutionary optimism bound up with the sexual liberalism of a figure like Havelock Ellis. In the prewar decades, when utopian schemes of racial improvement were often advanced by liberal thinkers, eugenics was still capable of socialist/progressive and feminist appreciation” (Clarke 15). According to his biographer, Phyllis Grosskurth, even in his adherence to his eugenic beliefs in sterilization of the unfit, he was vehemently against compulsory sterilization and any legislation that would take away people’s freedom to choose. Rather, he believed—somewhat naively, as Grosskurth accurately assesses—in *voluntary* sterilization, perhaps achieved through logical persuasion founded on a commitment to bettering society. Thus, in his view, even those deemed unfit were seen as equal members of society doing their part to improve the human race. Ellis was passionately against legal compulsory sterilization throughout his life. Grosskurth

followed Ellis's lead in attempting to use this problematically bigoted contemporary cultural belief to progressive ends. These attempts were not always successful. The second paragraph of the essay uses that language of disease to describe the unbalanced individual in contrast with the person of ideal development who balances the body, mind, and over-mind: "brain without physical strength is a manifestation of weakness, a disease comparable to cancerous growth or tumor; an empty fibrous bundle of glands as ugly and little to be desired as a body of a victim of some form of elephantiasis or fatty-degeneracy: over-mind without the balance of the other two is madness. . ." (17). She asserts in the next section that "normal, sane, balanced men and women" should strive for this equilibrium: "Not to desire and make every effort to develop along these natural physical lines, cripples and dwarfs the being" (17).

However, a shift occurs about halfway through the text in the way she uses eugenic philosophy. H.D. proposes the value, necessity, and higher humanity of those usually deemed inferior in eugenic thought. For example, she meditates on Meleager of Gadara, the poet of the *Greek Anthology*, who was of mixed ethnic origin: "a Jew father, a Greek mother" (33). The refrain, "what daemon of the islands was present at your ill-omened begetting?" implies the social inadequacy of such a mixed ethnic make-up. But then she goes on to suggest Meleager's superiority. He is a "princely stranger and a poet" (35). Still using the eugenic language of phrenology, H.D. exalts Meleager by noting his physical characteristics: "I would make him some gift, for his brow was more lordly

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notes that "Ellis's adherence to eugenics was in a strange sense an offshoot of nineteenth-century optimism and the related belief in progress through the instrumentality of science: that is, that man had in it his control to create a better race. Nowadays—with the horrors of mass exterminations behind us—such racial views are very much in discredit" (409-10). But at the turn of the twentieth century, as we have seen, this was a mainstream cultural belief: "These ideas, then, were current among Ellis's contemporaries" (412).



(though his father was no Greek) than the Kyllenian Hermes” (35). As we have seen, the Greek physical ideals had come to stand for modern eugenic ideals of physical and mental strength and health. Despite popular anti-Semitic eugenic attitudes, H.D. offers the half-Jewish Meleager as the ideal.

H.D., too, further subverts traditional eugenic thought, which places the responsibility for “race building” on women as mothers within a confined space of heteronormativity. She instead offers a model of mothering based on maternal sexual power and agency that is not only the basis for her creativity and poetic power but can also be world-changing. If just a few people develop their body/mind/over-mind connection, they can create drastic change: “Two of three people, with healthy bodies and the right sort of receiving brains, could turn the whole tide of human thought” (H.D., *Notes* 27). H.D. develops these theories in tandem with her reading of and friendship with Ellis as well as with her blossoming lesbian relationship with Bryher and the subsequent building of her own lesbian family after the birth of Perdita.

Ellis’s influence, H.D.’s changing sexual identity, and her second pregnancy combine to shape her conception of female reproductive capacity and eugenics. H.D., Aldington, and their circle were reading Ellis’s work in the period of the Great War. In a letter to H.D. dated July 9, 1918, Aldington refers to a volume of Ellis’s work that both he and H.D. had previously read in relation to Brigit Patmore’s 1913 abortion, which Aldington refers to as “that ill-advised operation” (Zilboorg, *Letters* 89).<sup>47</sup> July 1918 was

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<sup>47</sup> According to Zilboorg, Aldington developed his theories of motherhood through his own relationship with his mother and his readings in psychology in this period. While his “deep hostility toward [his own mother] developed into his notion of the ‘bad’ mother who appears regularly in his fiction,” he “developed simultaneously an ideal of the ‘good’ mother, based not so much on direct experience as on reading of both

when Bryher, who had made the acquaintance of Amy Lowell the year before, first came into H.D.'s life. In a letter postmarked July 13, 1918, H.D. invited Bryher and a friend to tea. Their courtship developed over the next several months during H.D.'s second pregnancy and is revealed in their letters from this period to be tangled up with their mutual interest in Havelock Ellis, classical Greek poetry, and a desire for freedom and adventure. They met a few more times that summer and fall, began a correspondence, and made plans to translate Greek poetry along with Aldington. By the end of that year the two women had become very close and began planning to travel the world together. In early 1919, when H.D. was in her third trimester, she remained in close contact with Ellis, and arranged for Bryher to see him to discuss her sexual "inversion."<sup>48</sup>

Zilboorg notes the obvious reasons why both H.D. and Bryher would be "drawn to Havelock Ellis and his interest in and acceptance of the range of sexual behavior recorded in his seven-volume *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*. Ellis's sympathies did not generate a theory, however, although they affirmed Bryher's [lesbian] sexual nature. . . and H.D.'s bisexual desires" (*Letters* 182). It is significant that H.D.'s second pregnancy coincided with the initial development of her relationship with Bryher, their mutual interest in Ellis and sexual psychology, their engagement with Classical Greece, and both

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early twentieth-century psychology (Havelock Ellis, for instance) and literature, English, continental, and classical" (*Letters* 2). Regarding Patmore's abortion, Zilboorg notes that it is unclear which Ellis work Aldington was referring to, as Ellis discusses the topic in various places; however, he is never anti-abortion, as Aldington seems to be in this letter. For example, in his *Studies on the Psychology of Sex*, vol. 6, Ellis treats the subject in depth and writes that although civilized society should do away with the need for abortion, there will always be some small percentage of cases where it would be called for. He suggests that "in order to do away with the need for abortion," society must invest in promoting the knowledge and use of birth control among both women and men and in providing social support to pregnant women and mothers so that their social position will be made more tolerable (Ellis 611). H.D. and Bryher refer to Ellis's vol. 6 frequently in their correspondence from 1918-1919.

<sup>48</sup> Louis Silverstein's online *H.D. Chronology* notes that H.D. wrote a check to Ellis February 1, 1919 and records some of her and Bryher's other contact with him.

women's identities as writers. Bryher came to H.D. as an adoring fan of her imagist poetry, and H.D. responded as a mentor, taking Bryher under her wing and supporting her through the writing of her novel *Development*, which H.D. saw as important work on lesbian identity. On February 14, 1919, H.D. wrote to Bryher about other sympathetic readers:

I am so eager for more Developments---and I want Dr. E. to see it and Mrs. Patmore. I don't really care about anyone else's criticism, but, though I do not feel I have exaggerated this straight and real intensity & beauty of its one first chapter, I should like confirmation from these two. Dr. Ellis because he knows, is the one great critic. Mrs. Patmore, because she is sensitive & feels (knows in another's way) and because she is so intensely and vitally interested in women who are more than women, are different from what is ordinarily accepted as such. (Bryher Papers, Box 13, Folder 537)

H.D.'s encouragement of Bryher's *Development* and her promotion of Ellis and Patmore as two readers who understood women in as "different from what is ordinarily accepted as such" suggests that H.D. was, in the period of her second pregnancy, consciously moving away from traditional notions of womanhood and motherhood. While critics have made much of the personal losses H.D. experienced between 1915 and 1919, the letters between H.D. and Bryher in 1918 and 1919 reveal a dynamic and nurturing H.D. who was engaged in literary activity and surrounded by friends such as Patmore and Ellis, who in turn nurtured her creatively and personally. So, while her friendship with D.H.

Lawrence disintegrated right before this period, and her marriage to Aldington finally fell apart after the birth of Perdita, H.D. was already building a new community around her. She was not, as critics have suggested, totally abandoned and destitute.

While she did, indeed, contract influenza late in her pregnancy, her correspondence with Bryher and others in this period shows her to be an active agent in her own life and not simply the “battered” victim who was “disassociated from my American family and my English friends,” as she described herself years later in *Tribute to Freud* (48-49). Letters and postcards written to Bryher in early April, right after H.D.’s second birth, are encouraging, full of hope and a sense of survival: One undated letter from early April reads, “the doctor says I have had pneumonia—of a sort—it was your fruit and flowers that persuaded me to pull through. . .” (Bryher. Papers, Box 13, Folder 537). Other letters in the period show how H.D. was meeting with Bryher, Patmore, and Richard Aldington to work out personal and professional future plans. When her marriage to Aldington finally collapsed shortly after Perdita’s birth, she was already well-connected with Patmore and Bryher, who worked together to make arrangements for Perdita. In other words, H.D. created a woman-centered, lesbian-feminist family with the personal support of Patmore and Bryher and the intellectual support of Ellis-as-feminist-progressive.

The support between Bryher and H.D. in their early courtship was mutual. Bryher was in the throes of a deep depression over her sexual confusion and her desire to escape

from her overbearing family.<sup>49</sup> Not only did H.D. encourage Bryher's writing, but she validated Bryher's lesbianism and desire to have been born a boy, and sent her to Ellis for further scientifically authorized validation. Bryher wrote to H.D. at St. Faith's maternity home about her visit with Ellis in mid-March, just two weeks before H.D. gave birth to Perdita. Bryher's fascinating account of her first meeting with Ellis merits lengthy quotation:

. . . Then he brought out tea and we plunged into "colour-hearing" and "cross-dressing." I should fill pages if I were to write all this down, so I shall have to wait and tell you about it. Then we got to the question of whether I was a boy sort of escaped into the wrong body and he says it is a disputed subject but quite possible and showed me a book about it. He said I should find it perhaps too difficult to read as it was very scientific. We agreed it was most unfair for it to happen but apparently I am quite justified in pleading I ought to be a boy, —am just a girl by accident. Then we got on to the "Studies" and said I thought everybody ought to read them. He smiled and told me about their being prosecuted. I wanted to know why the universe was narrow-minded and why any stupid novel could be published and nothing happens. . . . Then we talked about marriage and how my horror of it had increased since reading his chapter

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<sup>49</sup> A letter from May 1919 describes H.D. and Bryher's mutual support. H.D. writes, encouraging her to carry on: "I depend on you in so many ways. You and Brigit Patmore have literally saved my life—and now you must keep strong, give me some reason for going on living. Your work and the desire to see you free to begin or complete your adventure is a good reason—an exciting reason. Perhaps the infant, too, will be an incentive to me—and you will have to be strong and rise for its sake" (Bryher Papers, Box 13, Folder 537).

on the subject in Vol. VI. . . . Then we talked of progress and his big book that he is writing, the Position of Women in the Elizabethan Age, and he told me of a book on Crete. He said his wife was just like a boy. (Mar 20, 1919, H.D. Papers Box 3, Folder 80)

The scope of Bryher and Ellis's conversation encompassed all the crucial issues H.D. and Bryher were working through as their relationship grew and they began to set up their alternative lesbian family. Ellis authorized Bryher's lesbianism and desire to be a boy by presenting her with scientific texts on the matter, perhaps his own *Sexual Inversion*.<sup>50</sup> Bryher came out of it feeling "quite justified" and learned that even Ellis's wife, a recognized lesbian, "was just like a boy." Bryher's understanding—and fear—of marriage deepened after reading Ellis's study in volume 6 of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*. Bryher's romantic alliance with H.D. was a clear alternative to traditional heterosexual marriage, and it is significant that H.D.'s marriage to Aldington collapsed in this period as her bond with Bryher grew stronger. And both women looked to Ellis to endorse their relationship.

H.D.'s conception of mothering was rapidly changing in this period as well. In letters from December 1918, H.D. confided in Bryher about her previous traumatic birth and current pregnancy: "At present, I am a little tied. Three years ago, I had a sad illness and lost my little child. I am expecting to have another towards the end of March. Do not

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<sup>50</sup> Bryher and Ellis touch on the censorship of his books on homosexuality. It's interesting to note that while Ellis had a reputation as a free-thinker, he was not given to engaging in controversies or public debates. When his groundbreaking study of homosexuality, *Sexual Inversion*, was banned in England in 1898 for violating obscenity laws, he pulled the publication and opted to publish abroad rather than fighting the charges. According to Margaret Sanger, who was similarly arrested on obscenity charges and fled the US to avoid those charges, "Ellis, the scholar, preferred to ignore controversy" (Sanger 135).

take this too seriously, as you know my views on the average parent, and if arrangements can be made, an old nurse of Mrs. Patmore's children, will take at times, entire charge, so that I may continue my work, and make whatever arrangements I must for being in London" (Dec. 19, 1918, Bryher Papers, Box 13, Folder 537). She and Bryher had already been planning to travel together to Greece and the U.S, and H.D.'s plans to leave her baby in the care of a nurse or nursery were not unusual for middle- and upper-class women of the period. Although in first-wave eugenic feminism, mothers were seen as the moral center of the middle-class family who was responsible for race regeneration, the modern middle- and upper-class family was structured so that mothers were not actually personally responsible for the physical care of their children. It was common for infants and small children to live in nurseries away from their parents. Such arrangements were endorsed by many feminists who saw the actual work of childcare as interfering with women's ability to work outside the home. This is clearly H.D.'s stance, especially in the abstract before *Perdita* is born.

In December, H.D.'s letters to Bryher show how she is trying to balance her responsibility to her future daughter with her writing and her desire to travel with and act as a respectable, married "chaperone" to Bryher:

I have my health and my child to consider. But I believe I could arrange with a friend about a rather jolly, furnished flat in Bloomsbury. You could stay there with me, if you wished after your trip to Cornwall in the spring. I could not be with you the entire time. . . . as I should be with my child

and Mrs. Patmore's nurse off and on during the week. But between Mrs. Patmore and myself, you would be properly "chaperoned".

Later, I could undertake the trip to America if you still wished it.

(December 23, 1918, Bryher Papers, Box 13, Folder 537)

However, after Perdita's birth, H.D. had some unexpected emotional difficulty in actually leaving her child to go off on her adventures with Bryher—although she did eventually go: "Perdita is so very good. She stays with me most of the day. I am relieved about her 'home'—but I don't know what I shall do. I imagine after a month in London—& later in Cornwall—I will see more clearly" (April 19, 1919, Bryher Papers, Box 13, Folder 537). And then two days later, when H.D. was about to join Bryher in Cornwall, leaving Perdita behind, she wrote rather warily:

Everything seems to be going all right, but I will be so glad when tomorrow is over. I grow weaker as the parting comes—but I know it is best to have Perdita for the time. She gets more charming and that is the trouble. I am so glad the country is beautiful. I thought you would love it. We must have some fire—some great adventure—I am torn between a desire for a little place with Perdita & fairy books & Noah's arks and dolls, and a wild adventure. Perhaps in time, I will have both. (April 21, 1919, Bryher Papers, Box 13, Folder 537).

H.D. was explicitly torn, and Bryher's response, dated the next day, reveals a tension between her and Perdita that was in part the basis for H.D.'s feeling pulled in both directions. Bryher ended her April 22 letter to H.D. with a plea to focus on writing and



leave Perdita in the care of a nursery: “I hope you will be sensible over Perdita and remember you were not given poetry to sit and worry over an infant in a solitary cottage. I am very jealous for your poetry and I will even fight Perdita about it. She will be much healthier and happier for the next year or two in the home and when she is older we will take her to California and the Greek islands and teach her to adventure” (H.D. Papers, Box 3, Folder 80). After some difficulty, H.D. finally got Perdita settled in Norland Nursery and had Patmore look in on her while she went away to Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly just two months after Perdita’s birth. It was against this social and personal backdrop that H.D. wrote *Notes on Thought and Vision*.

Much in the way that H.D. sent Bryher to Ellis for validation of her sexuality, H.D. presented *Notes* to Ellis for scientific authorization, but was disappointed by his negative reception of the text that was so heavily influenced by his writing and friendship—a disappointment often cited by scholars.<sup>51</sup> Ellis refused to endorse H.D.’s theories of creativity because they were based on a radical redefinition of mothering, maternal power, and sexuality. They were also born out of H.D.’s hallucinations, which may or may not have been the result of anesthesia given during childbirth, and which medical science would necessarily pathologize as dangerous and unhealthy.<sup>52</sup> I want to suggest that H.D.’s postpartum hallucinations allowed her to think about her own

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<sup>51</sup> Robin Pappas writes convincingly about this “problematic. . . rejection of her work by Ellis, a man renowned for being aesthetically and sexually liberal” (152). Pappas reads Ellis’s work alongside H.D.’s unusual psychic/hallucinatory experiences after pregnancy as recounted in *Notes*, and argues that, in particular, “H.D.’s account of her extraordinary experience during pregnancy is susceptible to disenfranchisement and rejection because of a cultural dynamic in which 1) scientific and aesthetic discursive struggle for authority intersects with 2) scientific thought predicated on essential sex/gender hierarchy 3) within an ideological framework that pathologizes and feminizes extraordinary experience” (153).

<sup>52</sup> This is certainly Freud’s diagnosis of H.D.’s Corfu hallucinations recounted in *Tribute to Freud*.

individual experience of birth and mothering as increasingly bisexual and non-hetero-normative. Though sexually and socially progressive, Ellis could not apparently allow for such radical theories as H.D.'s. His writing on women, as Pappas argues, "forecloses on women's claims to knowledge about altered states of consciousness. Women who openly inquire into their sexual and intellectual roles do not engage in legitimate intellectual activity. Rather, through the lens of sexology, such behavior is reduced to categories of symptoms understood to originate in biological abnormalities" (162). Where Ellis rejected her theories, she incorporated that rejection into the text of *Notes*: "I spoke to a scientist, a psychologist about my divisions of mind and over-mind. He said that over-mind was not exactly the right term, that sub-conscious mind was the phrase I was groping for" (48). It is a moment in the text where scientific authority collides with H.D.'s own empirical authority and theorization of her own experience.

Whereas the scientist corrected the poet and assumed she did not understand basic scientific/psychoanalytical concepts, the poet considered the scientist's position and figured out a way to incorporate both: "I have thought for a long time about the comparative value of these terms, and I see at last my fault and his" (48). H.D. concluded that both she and the scientist erred in "cover[ing] too much of the field of abnormal consciousness by the term over-mind" or "subconscious," when the two "are entirely different states, entirely different worlds" (49). H.D. then found a way to incorporate both concepts into her theory. Both she and the scientist may have been wrong, but both were also right, according to H.D. Her theory had room for both. The subconscious, as anyone familiar with the basics of psychoanalysis knows, is the "world of sleeping dreams," whereas the "over-conscious world is the world is the world of waking dreams" (49).

And H.D.'s hallucinatory experiences—first her jellyfish vision out of which *Notes* grew, and then her writing-on-the-wall vision that she experienced in Greece the following year—are examples of such waking dreams. So, H.D.'s three “manifestations of life: body, mind and over-mind,” make room for a fourth term, the subconscious.

Instead of falling away or becoming insignificant when introducing the fourth term, the body becomes much more central and significant. H.D. ends with the crucial questions, “Where does the body come in? / What is the body?” (51). The jelly-fish structure, which sprouts “two forms of seed, one in the head and one in the body[,] make[s] a new spiritual birth” (50). Once we understand this all-important concept of over-mind, once we “become conscious of this jelly-fish about [our] head. . . this seed cast into the ground, [our] chief concern automatically becomes the body” (50). For H.D., the body is the site of birth of the self or a spiritual rebirth. The body is not separate from but inextricably part of the intellectual and spiritual. Just as “Christ and his father, or as the Eleusinian mystic would have said, his mother, were one,” so too are the mother/poet and her infant/spirit. They are not separate, binary beings in competition with one another; they are one and the same. H.D. knows all this from her “personal experience” (51). Her empirical knowledge as a childbearing woman and a poet gives her the authority to propound these theories of spirituality and creativity. H.D.'s theory of creativity goes against Cartesian dualism in that the mind and body are no longer split; instead, they are inextricably bound together along with “over-mind,” and this bound whole is directly responsible for poetic thinking. In this way, H.D.'s experience as a

childbearing woman does not prevent her from also being a poet; it enables her poetic thought and abilities.

## CHAPTER 3

### Cuts and Close-Ups: Abortion, Censorship, and H.D.'s Film Writing

#### I. Introduction

H.D.'s extant letters to Bryher and Kenneth Macpherson from Berlin written during the time of her 1928 abortion are physically cut up. Whole sentences and paragraphs are excised as with an X-ACTO knife, apparently eliminating evidence of the pregnancy and its termination. As a result, very few details about the abortion remain.<sup>53</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman notes that there is almost a "complete gap in [H.D.'s] writings on the abortion, an astonishing silence for someone who went over and over the significant events in her life in a variety of texts" (*Penelope* 231). H.D. was 42 at the time, and according to Friedman, "she seems to have had no regrets about ending this pregnancy" (*Penelope* 231). H.D.'s biographer, Barbara Guest, notes that she makes a "miraculous, guiltless recovery from what could have been a rotten scene" (Guest 195). But, as Friedman suggests, "Like the 'gap in consciousness' representing the stillbirth in *Madrigal*, the absence of the abortion in the autobiographical writings, even 'Autobiographical Notes,' which was not written for publication, may signify its very

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<sup>53</sup> H.D. scholars know the basics. Friedman notes that "H.D.'s entry in 'Autobiographical Notes' records the trip, without mentioning its purpose: 'November 19, I am in Berlin. . . I stay at the first Russian Pension; they, Br and K are both very kind. Dr. Sachs had helped me. They return as usual, to London for Christmas. There are trees in the street and snow. Krasa Kraus wants to take me out but I do not see anyone' (17-18)." Friedman also notes that H.D.'s *Nights*, written under the male pseudonym John Helforth, "alludes elusively to an abortion in a fictionalized context" (71), and that in her research, she has "found no other reference to the abortion" (*Penelope* 397n27). The "H.D. Chronology" adds to the record that Louis Silverstein has "seen references in Bryher/H.D./Macpherson correspondence (as well as references to the usage of a Haire ring). Hollenberg has found two 1928 letters from Macpherson to H.D. from Berlin to London with direct references to abortion with plans being made by Hanns Sachs; refers to a V.S. (female) [?] who has encouraged H.D. to carry it to term" (Silverstein, *H.D. Chronology* "1928 November").

importance to H.D.'s psychic state at the end of the decade" (231).<sup>54</sup> It is not just that H.D. rarely if ever mentions the abortion, it is that she purposely expunges it from her history. In one letter from December 1928, H.D. asks Bryher to have Macpherson destroy recent letters, presumably referring to the abortion: "Please, PLEASE, see that BIGDOG has No old letters in his pockets. . . you know. I meant again to ask him and then of course sub-conscious made me forget . . . for the whole experience brought me near to you both, brought us into some exquisite psychic rapport and certainly brought me to my senses as far as London is concerned. . . It was ALL FOR THE GOOD."<sup>55</sup> H.D. was adamant about striking the abortion from the record.

Although H.D. did not directly write about or even appear to be concerned with her 1928 abortion, the aesthetic and thematic interests of her contemporaneous *Close Up* writing reveal a "psychic state" that is very much concerned with women's bodily experience, which reflects not only her personal experience with abortion but the larger social situation of childbearing women in Europe during the period.<sup>56</sup> As we will see, in

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<sup>54</sup> In "Abortion, Identity Formation, and the Expatriate Woman Writer: H.D. and Kay Boyle in the Twenties," Donna Hollenberg posits that "a continuing conflict about creativity and procreativity may have contributed to a third pregnancy and her decision to have an abortion in 1928, a year after her mother's death, a choice that exacerbated her psychological pain" (499). Hollenberg cites letters from Kenneth Macpherson quoted in Guest's biography as evidence of this conflict and its resulting psychological pain, which is, oddly, the opposite of Guest's conclusion. I have not found in H.D.'s letters any clear evidence of what may have "contributed" to the pregnancy. Hollenberg also suggests that H.D. conflated her 1915 stillbirth with her 1928 abortion and felt tremendous guilt over the two reproductive failures, as she reads H.D.'s short story "Two Americans," written shortly after the abortion, for evidence of her guilty conscience (507). Although I agree that the abortion was more significant to H.D. than critics have previously understood, I do not see compelling evidence in "Two Americans" of a guilty conscience specifically related to the abortion. I offer my own reading of H.D.'s decision-making process that resulted in her abortion below.

<sup>55</sup> Typography and punctuation, including ellipses, as in the original.

<sup>56</sup> In this period, H.D. had temporarily abandoned poetry to immerse herself in the world of film. In fact, she thought of herself first and foremost as a filmmaker, reveling in her exploration of the new medium during the years she wrote for *Close Up* (1927-1930). In response to the first question of Margaret Anderson's 1929 *Little Review* questionnaire, "What should you most like to do, to know, to be? (in case

her *Close Up* essays, H.D. does not write about her own abortion or even how abortion is handled in contemporary film, although Bryher, Macpherson, and others regularly write about the censorship of films on abortion (among other topics deemed obscene and socially inappropriate) in the months directly following H.D.'s abortion. Instead, H.D.'s *Close Up* writing thinks through issues of technique—namely, the interplay of close-ups and editing, and its impact on the portrayal of women in film. H.D. scrutinizes film in order to think through women's negative position in society, and women's bodily control versus the body politic. Thus, while *Close Up* overtly takes on social and political issues like censorship and abortion, H.D. censors herself in terms of her own abortion and finds covert strategies to critique women's negative social position. Ultimately, *Close Up* gives her a forum within which to make her oppositional cultural critique, marking a shift toward the political in her later poetics.

My argument partakes in the critical discussion about bodily experience and reproduction in relation to modernist literary production begun by such critics as Peter Middleton, Janet Lyon, and Christina Hauck.<sup>57</sup> I respond in particular to Hauck's important work on T.S. Eliot's poetics of reproductive failure. In "Abortion and the Individual Talent," Hauck argues that we must look at "Eliot's figuration of his own

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you are not satisfied)," H.D. declared, "I am involved with pictures" (qtd. in Guest 199). Her main form of written expression in the late twenties was prose, specifically essays about film. She was also working on the biblical novel *Pilate's Wife* during this period. It was begun in 1924, completed in 1929, and then revised in the late 1950s. The themes of *Pilate's Wife* echo the preoccupations of H.D.'s *Close Up* writing. The novel centers on the title character's transformation from a dazed, half-dead shadow to a reborn visionary being, and it explicitly questions the exclusion of women from Judeo-Christian history and doctrine, offering itself as a revision of the Bible that places women at the center of the founding of Christianity. Although a closer look at the novel is not within the scope of this chapter, it would be interesting to look at *Pilate's Wife* in the context of Cecil B. DeMille's contemporaneous biblical film *King of Kings*, which H.D. reviews in *Close Up*.

<sup>57</sup> In addition to Hauck's "Abortion and the Individual Talent," which I discuss below, see Middleton on masculinity in Eliot and Janet Lyon's *Manifestoes*.

poetry as abortion/miscarriage” in the context of the “reproductive failure [that] constituted a major crisis for late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Anglo-American culture” (225). Hauck rightly points out that “the definition and resolution of that crisis offered very different consequences for men and for women” (225). Given that *The Waste Land* is considered “one of the exemplars of modernism itself,” Hauck argues that “the reproductive failure in the poem, particularly abortion, signals for Eliot, the multiple failures of modernism,” as well (225). Whereas critics tend to claim that male modernists use metaphors of female reproductive capability to claim creative authority, Eliot turns such metaphors inside out by bemoaning reproductive failure.<sup>58</sup> I agree with Hauck that reproductive failure—miscarriage and abortion—is a pervasive theme in modernist literature, but I argue that abortion for H.D. signals a crisis, not of reproductive failure, but of reproductive freedom for women, whose bodies were the site of political struggle and debate in the eugenic period. Even as H.D. embraces film as a modern art form, her *Close Up* writing reveals a feminist anxiety. Before turning to H.D.’s *Close Up* writing, I will put her own abortion in the larger socio-historical context of 1928 abortion culture, and then I will look at *Close Up* as a forum for political debate and protest against censorship in the period.

## II. Western European Abortion Culture in 1928

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<sup>58</sup> See Hauck’s literature review summarizing the “methodologically dissimilar” work of Terry Castle, Susan Stanford Friedman, Barbara Johnson, and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, which show how, as “Wayne Koestenbaum puts it succinctly, ‘Fantasies of male maternity buttress male modernism’” (224).



What made H.D. choose to terminate the pregnancy in Berlin rather than one of her places of residence, London or Territet, Switzerland? Abortion was illegal across Europe, and the laws were similar in Great Britain, Switzerland, and Germany. In Great Britain, abortion had been illegal since the Offenses against the Person Act of 1861. The Preservation of Infant Life Bill, which made it illegal to terminate a viable pregnancy except in cases where the mother's own life is in danger, was introduced in England in November 1928, exactly when H.D. was deciding what to do about her own unplanned pregnancy. The bill was passed the following year.<sup>59</sup> Switzerland, particularly in the Canton of Vaud, where H.D. lived part-time and where she was living when she found herself pregnant in November 1928, had harsh exclusionary laws that might have subjected H.D. to forced sterilization had she sought an abortion there.

Veronique Mottier's work on the Swiss "gender regime" provides a clear picture of the social climate H.D. was living in at the end of the 1920s (253).<sup>60</sup> Mottier argues that "the founding institutions of the Swiss nation-state have been built upon the exclusion of women," and offers historical data showing women's bodies to be the main site of eugenic practices, as women constituted the overwhelming majority of those who were subject to the new laws.<sup>61</sup> While Switzerland was a European forerunner in legalizing eugenic practices such as marriage restrictions, forced sterilizations, and

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<sup>59</sup> Abortion was not made legal in the UK until the Abortion Act of 1967. Although women over 30 won the right to vote in Great Britain in 1918, previously excluded younger women (between 21 and 30) had only just been granted the right to vote by the Representation of People Act of 1928. For a detailed history of abortion in Great Britain, see Brookes.

<sup>60</sup> Drawing on the work of Connell, Mottier defines the gender regime as "the ideological and material practices which construct gender identities and institutionalize gender inequalities" (253).

<sup>61</sup> "For example, out of the 57 eugenic sterilizations that were carried out on the basis of the Vaud law in the period between 1929 to 1936, only 1 was carried out on a man. . . In the years before the law, from 1919 to 1928, 45 women and 4 men had been sterilized in this canton, the majority on the grounds of 'feeble-mindedness'" (258). More on this dubious designation below.

“eugenically motivated abortions” for the “mentally ill” and otherwise “unfit,” similar laws had already been instituted in two-thirds of the United States (beginning with Indiana in 1907). Other European countries, including Germany and Great Britain, followed suit (Mottier 258). Furthermore, “as in other countries, the majority of legal eugenic sterilizations in Switzerland were carried out on young female social deviants” who were labeled as “‘maladapted’, ‘sexually promiscuous’, of ‘low intelligence’, ‘mentally ill’, or ‘feeble-minded’”. The general category of mental illness and feeble-mindedness were notoriously vague” (Mottier 259). In terms of female sexuality, it seems that anything outside of married heterosexual, reproductive sex could be deemed deviant and warranted eugenic regulation.<sup>62</sup> Historical data for the Swiss canton of Zurich shows that thousands of “sterilizations were carried out on the basis of approval from the psychiatric polyclinic of Zurich. The large majority of these concerned women who had asked for permission to have an abortion, which was often granted on the condition of sterilization” (Mottier 258). Women having abortions in Vaud were at risk of being sterilized and/or institutionalized. This coupled with Swiss women’s lack of political power—they did not receive the right to vote until 1971—demonstrates women’s negative position in society.

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<sup>62</sup> The policing of femininity and respectable female sexuality appears as a central motive in the practice of eugenic sterilization, since “dirtiness” and moral deficiency” (both of which could include sexual promiscuity), “disorderly housekeeping,” “loose morals,” “uninhibited” female sexuality, and “nymphomania” were considered as signs of mental illness and hereditary degeneracy, and frequently used as arguments for forced sterilizations. Moreover, sterilization was thought to be partly able to moderate more generally female disorders such as “hysteria,” “nervosity,” “masturbatory insanity,” “nymphomania,” and sexual “abnormalcy,” and was therefore also used prophylactically (260).

H.D. was aware of her negative social position and, therefore, her vulnerability to Swiss laws, in terms of her status as the mother of an “illegitimate” child. Although she was still technically married to Richard Aldington, they had been estranged since the birth of Perdita, whose biological father was musician Cecil Grey. As H.D.’s letters to her estranged husband suggest, she was quite aware that she had no legal rights and was terrified of what Aldington might do. In fact, in 1928, shortly before H.D.’s third pregnancy and abortion, Bryher, who was married to Kenneth Macpherson, legally adopted Perdita in order to protect her and H.D from British and Swiss laws that were unsympathetic to single mothers. Although H.D. was most likely shielded from any real danger by Bryher’s money, she was for all intents and purposes in a dangerous social position: she could easily have been labeled an “alien,” “sexually promiscuous,” “nervous,” “bisexual,” or a “single mother,” any and all of which could have put her at the mercy of the Swiss gender regime. She had no real legal rights.

Weimar Germany’s abortion laws were similarly restrictive.<sup>63</sup> Abortion was illegal, but since German women won the right to vote in 1918, women of all social classes had been calling for a repeal of the law that restricted their reproductive rights (Usborne 1).<sup>64</sup> As a result of such feminist social protest, the German law was amended

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<sup>63</sup> See Grossman, Usborne, and Canning.

<sup>64</sup> Paragraphs 218 to 220 of the German penal code, which had been in effect since 1871, made it illegal to have an abortion. Helping a woman procure an abortion, either for money or not, and performing an abortion were also punishable offenses. Usborne provides a translation of the law in full: “§218: A pregnant woman who has an abortion or who has her foetus [in German *Frucht*, fruit] destroyed in the womb is to be sentenced to penal servitude for up to five years. If there are mitigating circumstances the penalty is reduced to a minimum of six months’ imprisonment. The same penalty applies to any person helping procure an abortion or to destroy a fruit in the womb with the consent of the pregnant woman. §219: Any person helping to procure an abortion for money is to be sentenced to penal servitude of up to ten years.

in 1927 to allow for therapeutic abortion. However, it was necessary for women to get the opinion and permission of two doctors (5). Without such permission, women were still subject to imprisonment, and lay abortionists, even those performing therapeutic abortions, were subject to even longer prison sentences than they had been under the previous penal code.<sup>65</sup> While Berlin was probably no safer than London or Vaud for a woman wanting to terminate a pregnancy, it had its advantages for H.D. The fact that Berlin was not H.D.'s residence would have made it safer for her, as she could drop in for the procedure and leave directly after recovery. Furthermore, her involvement in the film world provided a perfect cover. Bryher and Macpherson were already in Berlin hobnobbing with filmmakers on the Kurfürstendamm, and Sachs had the medical connections and could make all the arrangements.<sup>66</sup> The little remaining documentary evidence we have shows that H.D. apparently felt safe and cared for in this setting.

Letters between Bryher and H.D. from that month include cryptic references to supplies one might need in order to have an under-the-table medical procedure. In one December 1928 letter from Bryher to H.D., Bryher asks H.D. to buy her a formalin tablet, a disinfecting agent used to sterilize medical supplies, ostensibly because Bryher has the

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§220: Any person who procures an abortion without the knowledge or consent of the woman is to be sentenced to penal servitude for not less than two years. If the operation results in death of the woman, penal servitude for not less than ten years, or for life, is prescribed. Attempts are punishable" (228n2).

<sup>65</sup> Osborne's chapter "Abortion in the Marketplace: Lay Practitioners and Doctors Compete" details how medical doctors in this period strived to secure a monopoly on abortion, stealing it from the provenance of midwives and other lay abortionists. While both doctors and midwives continued to perform abortions in this period, midwives were more likely to be prosecuted and experience harsher punishments for performing abortions than medical doctors, even though medical doctors often provided worse care with worse outcomes (94-126).

<sup>66</sup> It is interesting that Bryher and Macpherson left Berlin before H.D.'s arrival. They apparently set the abortion in motion by having Sachs make all the arrangements but did not stay to see H.D. through. They, of course, would have been subject to the same laws restricting abortion, so perhaps it was safest for them to leave before the abortion was performed.

flu.<sup>67</sup> It seems unlikely that Bryher would really be requesting a formalin tablet for her flu. In another letter from the same month, Bryher links H.D.'s abortion to the medical supplies, although still cryptically. Bryher begins, "We were so happy to have your two letters, Monday & Tuesday last night and hope all is well with the Kotex." A few lines later, Bryher writes, "Glad to know the Jupiter lamps have arrived and also that you have the Formalin table [sic]. What though happened to the parlor room lamps and the steel tables?" and then in the next line, Bryher urges, "Do have hot drinks; it is most necessary" (H.D. Papers, Box 3, Folder 84). In addition to the formalin tablet, why the lamps and steel tables? Was H.D. redecorating her pension room with medical equipment?<sup>68</sup> Although Bryher suggests these all might be normal precautions for preventing the flu in winter, it is more likely H.D. had assembled the equipment to help ensure a sterile environment for her abortion and recovery.<sup>69</sup>

We do not know who performed H.D.'s abortion, or whether it was a medical doctor or a lay abortionist. According to a 1928 report from Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute of Sexual Science in Berlin, half of all abortions were performed by lay abortionists, including midwives, about 30 percent were brought on by women

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<sup>67</sup> "Bought you 4 Corona purples. Could you ask Sophie to enquire at Pharmacie du Kursaal if they have a Formalin disinfecting table [sic] and to buy one if not over 30 francs. If not I'll get one here. Nurse says they are splendid. You burn them if you've a cold to disinfect or in flu time. The same maker a German, as Formamint. I think Bauer or Bayer but not quite sure. This is urgent." (H.D. Papers, Box 3, Folder 84).

<sup>68</sup> In later letters, H.D. suggests the lamps were being sent home to Switzerland, so it is possible that Bryher wanted them for the film experiments that she, H.D., and Macpherson were working on in this period. Again, film provides a neat cover for the illegal abortion.

<sup>69</sup> Perhaps it was performed at the "Pension Nurnberger Platz," on whose stationary H.D. wrote her December 1928 Berlin letters to Bryher and Macpherson. The stationary advertises the hotel's modern amenities: "Pension Nurnberger Platz, Inhaberin: V. von Tubental, Berlin W 50, Geisbergstr, 21, Elegant moeblierte Zimmer Elect. Licht Zentralheizung, Lift, fliebetriebenes, Wasser, Fernsprecher in allen Zimmern, Untergrundbahn—Strassenbahn" (Bryher Papers, Box 13, Folder 546).

themselves, and only 20 percent were performed by doctors (Usborne 102). Although she would have been in the minority, it is possible and perhaps likely that H.D.'s abortion fell into this last group, given that she chose obstetricians over midwives for her births. And medical abortions did not necessarily take place at hospitals or in doctor's offices. Both Usborne's research on abortion in Germany and Brookes's work on abortion in Great Britain suggests that upper-class women with money and means tended to procure medical abortions (Usborne 128; Brookes 5, 36-37). It is also more likely that Sachs would have had medical rather than lay-abortionist contacts through his affiliation with the University of Berlin and the Berlin Institute of Psychoanalysis. But we can't know for certain.

Medical abortions were much more invasive.<sup>70</sup> Usborne offers a description of a typical medical abortion in Weimar Germany based on Prof. Dr. Georg Winter's 1927 "guidelines for artificial miscarriage" for doctors:

First the cervix was dilated with metal dilators. . . or gauze tampons. . . which swelled up; some doctors also used a sharp instrument to rupture the membranes. . . to bring on contractions. This was usually, though not always, followed by the scraping of foetal and placental tissue out of the womb with a curette, a sharp little knife, an operation, which was normally considered too painful and too dangerous to perform without an anaesthetic. (123)

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<sup>70</sup> Both Brookes and Usborne go into the various methods of abortion used by lay abortionists and medical doctors, and by women themselves. While women and lay abortionists tended to use abortifacients and other less invasive methods, medical doctors tended to offer an operation, a dilation and curettage. See Brookes 32-5 and Usborne 122-5.

Dilation and curettage (D&C) refers to the expanding of the cervix through the body's vaginal opening in order to cut out tissue. The opening up of the body in this manner in turn opened up women to infection. As Osborne notes, complications like infection and death were more likely given that instruments like dilators and knives were used with medical abortions. And the use of anesthesia made women vulnerable to possible abuse, including sterilization, without their consent or knowledge (124).<sup>71</sup> The medical abortionist's specialized obstetric view is reminiscent of film techniques like the close up that similarly put the body on display.<sup>72</sup> It was in this same period that film was being used increasingly for educational purposes to provide an even closer view of the body, to teach medical practitioners how to perform abortions and other medical procedures.

Historian Ulf Schmidt points out that common film techniques, including close ups, slow motion, and time lapse, lent themselves as valuable teaching tools and "became part of the standard set of stylistic tools in health films" (43). Human bodies, especially female bodies, were put on display for educational purposes. The majority of medical films made in universities in the Weimar period were through the departments of

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<sup>71</sup> H.D. apparently did not worry about such risks, but she did take precautions against infection. As the above letter from Bryher mentions their domestic worker, Sophie, H.D. also apparently had a familiar caretaker with her in Berlin to help look after her during the procedure and recovery. Sachs's involvement likewise helped ensure H.D.'s safety. Sachs had connected with Bryher and H.D. through their shared interests of psychoanalysis and cinema. Around the time of H.D.'s pregnancy and abortion, Sachs had been analyzing Bryher in Berlin, at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute, and he was encouraging her to become an analyst herself. According to "A Chronology of *Close Up* in Context" in *Close Up 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*, Bryher met both G. W. Pabst and Hanns Sachs for the first time in Berlin in November 1927, a year before H.D.'s abortion. Bryher and Macpherson had met Freud previously, in May 1927, when they flew from Venice to Vienna expressly to meet him. The first issue of *Close Up* was issued in July 1927. Sachs had also been interested in cinema, and in 1926, he served as a professional consultant (along with Karl Abraham) on Pabst's psychoanalytic film *Secrets of the Soul* (see Marcus and Konigsberg).

<sup>72</sup> I wonder if there is any link to be made here to gendered notions of spectatorship, like Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" or her "Afterthoughts" to that pioneering work.

psychiatry, surgery, and gynecology.<sup>73</sup> During the 1920s, 145 surgical and 136 gynecological films were made at Berlin University (Schmidt 43).<sup>74</sup> The departmental affiliations of psychiatry, surgery, and gynecology reveal the extent to which hereditary health policy was acted out on the site of the female body. Not only were the predominantly female patients appearing in these medical films subject to medical procedures performed on them with or without their consent, but the films themselves were used to promote involuntary sterilization for the socially “unfit” on an increasingly wide scale with the rise of National Socialism.<sup>75</sup> In both cases, where women’s bodies are surgically and instrumentally opened up under anesthesia and where they are filmed and used to promote unethical health policies, women’s knowledge of their own experience of their own bodies are obscured in the service of so-called public good and social progress. In the first case, individual female patients were vulnerable to medical rape, exploitation, experimentation, and forced sterilization; in the second case women’s bodies that were put on display in film for educational purposes served to promote wide-scale nonconsensual medical procedures and abuse.

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<sup>73</sup> Ulf Schmidt’s *Medical Films, Ethics, and Euthanasia in Nazi Germany* traces the use of film technology for the purposes of medical research and education. His book in part argues that “Film became an integral part of medical science not only as a research tool, but also as a means of popularizing ideas of health and welfare, of reforming psychiatry and of introducing eugenics to the general public” (42)

<sup>74</sup> Schmidt is purposeful in his project to name names, giving an historical record of Nazi collaborators involved in making medical films. For example, the Berlin University gynecologist Professor Stoeckel made many medical films with the help of Russian-born cameraman Viktor Trinkler (101-105). I wonder if Trinkler, or other cameramen and crew members for medical films also worked on art films, specifically the films H.D. and her cohort were reviewing. I have not yet been able to establish a link, but I remain curious. Who were Pabst’s cameramen?

<sup>75</sup> Schmidt argues that “RWU films were used by heterogeneous sections of the German medical and teaching profession in schools and universities in order to sanction sterilization legislation, hereditary biology and racial psychiatry” (173).



H.D.'s Berlin abortion put her in this space between reproductive freedom and vulnerability, and pointed to women's problematic social position in 1928, when in many countries they still did not have the right to vote.<sup>76</sup> And while H.D. was undergoing a potentially dangerous bodily procedure, *Close Up* itself was active in covering developments in and promoting medical film.<sup>77</sup> In fact, Bryher regularly reviewed educational films including medical, science, and nature documentaries for *Close Up*. As I go on to show, Bryher and others often used metaphors of abortion and bodily mutilation to describe and protest the censorship of both art and medical films that took women's health issues (like abortion) as their subject matter.<sup>78</sup> As we will see in the next section, the extended metaphor continually alluded to in the pages of *Close Up* positions film as the body mutilated by the censors-as-negligent-abortionist. The filmmaker's vision is obscured and (re)productive control is taken away without consent or warning.<sup>79</sup> Meanwhile, H.D. remained silent on the subjects of abortion and censorship. Instead, she

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<sup>76</sup> I have not been able to establish any relation between the later-Nazi doctors working in the Weimar period and H.D.'s 1928 Berlin abortion, and I am not necessarily suggesting that there is any direct connection, but the time, place, and assistance of Sachs (with his connections to the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute and the University of Berlin) puts H.D.'s bodily experience at the nexus of psychoanalysis, cinema, medical science, and educational film. And I want to suggest, as Schmidt, Grossman and others have been sure to point out, that Weimar happenings "were 'precursors' to Nazi policies" (Grossman vii).

<sup>77</sup> It should be noted, too, that educational films were shown in public to general audiences, as is evidenced by *Close Up*'s regular publication of "Films to Be Seen," which includes medical/educational films such as the Russian *The Mechanics of the Brain*, which Bryher also reviews in the series "Six Russian Films." More on this below.

<sup>78</sup> For example, in her December 1928, "How to Rent a Film," Bryher lists the various films censored upon rental in England. She described the *Student of Prague*'s censorship as "jagged little lumps" being "clef out" (47). Both Bryher and Macpherson regularly protest films being shown in "mutilated form" in their *Close Up* writing (See their writings on Pabst and his film *The Love of Jeanne Ney* in the December 1927-January 1928 issues). We will see below a similar use of metaphor in Bryher's *Close Up* contributions written after H.D.'s pregnancy and abortion.

<sup>79</sup> For example, the back page of the January 1928 issue of *Close Up* recounts the story of the censoring of Pabst's *The Love of Jeanne Ney*: After passing "intact by the censors" in Berlin, "whole scenes" from Pabst's film were later "cut out" by the censors while he was away in Paris: "All this was done without warning and without even letting him know afterwards, so that, except for a lucky chance, *Jeanne Ney* would certainly have been presented in mutilated form" (n.p.).

wrote about art films, like *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and *Joyless Street*, scrutinizing them for their technique and treatment of their female leads. H.D.'s film writing continually notes the potential for otherwise neutral film techniques, like the use of close ups and editing, to enact a kind of gendered brutalization on the actors and spectators alike.

### III. Censorship and Abortion in *Close Up*

It is hard to say whether H.D. felt any ambivalence about terminating her third pregnancy, as her letters concerning the matter are severely censored. But it is clear that her decision to have the abortion was not made completely independently. As suggested above, there were clear reasons to terminate, but the biggest one may have been that her partners, Bryher and Macpherson, did not want another child.<sup>80</sup> According to Barbara Guest, when H.D. wrote Macpherson to tell him she was pregnant, “[h]e immediately wrote that under no circumstances must she have the ‘Pup.’ He reassured her that Dr. Sachs would give her whatever help she needed if she would come to Berlin” (Guest 193). Guest quotes one letter from Macpherson: “Brave, handsome, beautiful, sad, noble, furry dignified kitten, hurry up and come and have that star or starfish or star maiden or whatever it is removed. . . Just get on that train and tell itself its troubles are almost over”

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<sup>80</sup> Perdita was nine at the time and recently legally adopted by Bryher and Macpherson, who were married in September 1927, in order to protect her and H.D. from any potential legal action taken by Aldington. Another child fathered by a man other than her legal husband could put H.D. at risk in eugenic Europe. In a letter from H.D. to Bryher dated Tuesday, Nov. 6, 1928, just before the abortion, H.D. writes to Bryher about arrangements for Perdita and Sophie, the nanny, to go from Victoria Station back to Switzerland: “[Sophie] wept when I showed her the pup’s new name etc. I explained tactfully but there is no harm in the matter leaking out. I did not say NOT to tell as that would make it mysterious. I simply explained that P. was Aldington as usual for general matter but “officially” she was Macpherson etc” (Bryher Papers, Folder 546).

(qtd. in Guest 193-4).<sup>81</sup> Neither he nor Bryher were interested in considering the possibility of H.D. having the baby. The decision to abort was over-determined and cannot be read as uncomplicatedly autonomous on H.D.'s part.

While Bryher and Macpherson were worrying over their personal situation with H.D.'s abortion, they were preoccupied with parallel issues in the film world. Reading *Close Up* from about September 1928 through the end of 1929 reveals the creative preoccupations of the editorial three.<sup>82</sup> Bryher and Macpherson's frequent writings about film censorship from 1928 through 1929 intersect with H.D.'s abortion, particularly because censorship in this period was often motivated by suppressing any depiction of female reproductive matters including sexuality, childbirth and abortion.<sup>83</sup> In these *Close Up* writings, once again, what the editors call the "mutilated body" of censored film mirrors the bodies of women. Starting from the September 1928 issue of *Close Up*, special attention was given to Russian film, which the editors saw as the pinnacle of cinematic achievement.<sup>84</sup> This special "Russian number" coincided with the beginning of H.D.'s third pregnancy.<sup>85</sup> The issue included the first installment of the serialized article

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<sup>81</sup> Guest suggests that there was little doubt that Macpherson was the father, even as she notes that H.D. had also been involved with Andrew Gibson, Stephen Guest, and Peter Rodeck at the time (194). In later letters, H.D. indicated Macpherson's paternity, and Macpherson took responsibility.

<sup>82</sup> "Editorial three" is Anne Friedberg's phrasing. Although Kenneth Macpherson was the official editor of *Close Up*, Friedberg, in chapter 2 of her dissertation on the journal, describes the endeavor as an editorial collaboration among Macpherson, Bryher, and H.D. While H.D. was not involved in day-to-day operation of the journal, as Bryher was, she worked closely with her two companions, and was according to Friedberg a "silent partner" (32).

<sup>83</sup> In this section, I focus mostly on Bryher's writing, but I also want to consider the authorship and authorization of Macpherson as the journal's editor. As we shall see, Macpherson does not directly write about abortion films, but he commissions other contributors to do so.

<sup>84</sup> See especially Macpherson's "As Is" and H.D.'s "Russian Films" in this issue. Both are effusive in their general praise of Russian film technique.

<sup>85</sup> It is difficult to pinpoint the exact beginning of the pregnancy. H.D. probably conceived sometime in September or October but must not have realized she was pregnant until November, when she wrote to Macpherson and Bryher in Berlin. It seems she wrote to them as soon as she realized. Home pregnancy tests did not exist in 1928. The first scientific pregnancy test had just been invented in Berlin in 1928 by

“Six Russian Films,” which spanned the September through November issues and included contributions by both Macpherson and Bryher. H.D.’s essay “Russian Film” also appeared in the September number. These contributions by the editorial three emphasized that subject matter related to women’s bodies (e.g., pregnancy, childbirth, and abortion) as well as social problems that impacted women’s lives (e.g., poverty, violence, prostitution) were frequently the combined topics of Russian films. Such topics made Russian films vulnerable to the censors, particularly in Great Britain, where Russian communist ideals were perceived as a threat to the British monarchy. H.D. touched on this: “Russian Film at the moment deals with hunger, with starvation, with murder, with oppression, with adultery, with incest, with infanticide, with childbirth, with the very throes of childbirth itself. Many of these films will be released in Germany. Certain others will be shown only to select audiences, specialists in political economy, psychology, and psychiatry” (“Russian Films” 18). H.D. suggested that the films would be censored, restricted, if not banned completely, in England, partly because of their subject matter and partly because they came from Soviet Russia, and the Allied countries feared the spread of communist ideals through film.<sup>86</sup> While H.D.’s piece didn’t review specific films, Bryher and Macpherson looked at six films that take on the gritty and

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Selmar Aschheim and Bernard Zondek, but was not yet widely used (see Rudolf and Ludwig). As Usborne reminds us, “women in the 1920s and 1930s still often relied on the evidence of their own bodies to know what ‘state’ they were in,” and she adds, “Of course, in the Weimar years, before chemical pregnancy tests were available, doctors’ diagnoses of pregnancy were by no means more scientific in practice than women’s own hunches; doctors had to rely on what they felt with their hands and saw with their eyes. But in contrast, women experienced their own bodily changes directly and somatically” (129). According to the NIH Web page “a thin blue line: the History of the Pregnancy Test Kit,” it was not until the 1930s and 1940s that “popular childbirth books began to encourage women to visit a doctor’s office for confirmation of pregnancy rather than relying on ‘old wives’ tales’ for diagnosis.”

<sup>86</sup> Macpherson notes that in the fall of 1928 in Vaud, Switzerland, Russian films were neither censored nor banned: “Vaud is a canton, by the way, where Russian films are *not* prohibited. *Mother*, for example, has been freely going the rounds of late, in the same original version in which you saw it recently (we hope) at the London Film Society” (“As Is” Nov. 1928).

graphic topics H.D. lists: *Two Days* (starvation, murder, oppression, infanticide), *The Peasant Women of Riazanj* (adultery, incest, childbirth), *Pits* (adultery, unwanted pregnancy), *The Mechanics of the Brain*, which I will look at below (the throes of childbirth itself), *The Forty-First* (starvation, adultery, murder), and *The Son* (adultery, childbirth).<sup>87</sup>

As *Close Up*'s interest in Russian film grew over the course of the fall of 1928, the editors encountered more and more problems with film censorship, culminating in a special issue in February 1929 devoted to the problem of film censorship across Europe.<sup>88</sup> The "censorship issue" included articles by contributors from Great Britain, France, Germany, and Switzerland reporting on censorship as a threat to artistic freedom.<sup>89</sup> Macpherson had been planning this special issue at precisely the time H.D. was in Berlin for her abortion.<sup>90</sup> Although abortion was not the only topic that made a film vulnerable to censorship, it was one of the main ones, and it was a popular topic for film in late

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<sup>87</sup> Abortion was notably legal in Russia in this period. Between 1920 and 1936, the Bolshevik revolution ensured that Russia would have one of the most liberal policies concerning women's reproductive rights. See Michaels; Heer.

<sup>88</sup> Anne Friedberg's dissertation on *Close Up* includes an appendix on "The Censorship Petition," which appeared in *Close Up* in January 1929 and asked for signatures from the journal's readership to be presented to Parliament. Friedberg notes that Bryher and Macpherson had been protesting film censorship since the starting up the journal in 1927, but their protest really gained ground at the end of 1928 and through 1929. See Friedberg 335-339.

<sup>89</sup> European censors aimed to suppress any gratuitous depiction of crime or anything that might have the potential of encouraging spectators to commit similar illegal and/or indecent acts. For example, the censorship issue of *Close Up* published a reproduction and translation of a letter from the German censor to Erno Metzner, the director of the short film *Überfall* ("Accident"). The letter claims Metzner's is a "criminal film" because "its content and action move in the world of crime, and the representation of crime in this film is its own purpose" (14). The censors worry that the film would induce spectators to commit similar crimes: "The events represent outrages, shown with impressive lucidity to the spectators, so that they might induce persons who incline to the commitment of crime to the extension thereof" (14). Finally, they pronounce the film of little artistic value, and state that it "could not be released because of its brutal and demoralizing effect" (14).

<sup>90</sup> Berlin correspondent Andor Krazsna-Kraus's letter in the February issue is dated mid-January, and notes that Macpherson discussed the upcoming censorship issue with him in Berlin in December, while H.D. was in Berlin for the abortion.

1920s Europe.<sup>91</sup> *Close Up* regularly reviewed such films, protesting their “mutilation” by the censors.

Bryher’s work in *Close Up*, in particular, argued against the censorship of medical and educational films, which could teach the public about the science and nature of human biology. Bryher’s May 1929 contribution was “A Private Showing of *Cosmos*” (the English version of the German *Natur und Liebe*), a review of a nature documentary that was apparently banned by the English censors due to its images of animal reproduction.<sup>92</sup> Bryher explained that “the chief incident ‘cut’ from the London version appears to be a scene of a large cat stalking another along the house tops” (44). Bryher’s mocking tone in the piece suggests the ridiculousness of such censorship: “We are all accustomed to this mood among cats, so it seems a little strange that it should be considered immoral” (44). But her next paragraph subtly makes a key argument. Bryher claimed that the major “defect” of the censored film was that “man’s origin is nowhere dealt with and that therefore the point of the picture is omitted” (44). Bryher pointed to the problems of the fear of childbirth and general prudery concerning women’s bodies, which lead to the censorship of any image relating to female reproductive capacity in order not to scare off or embarrass potential mothers. This was especially a concern of eugenicists of the period who feared that the civilized, “fit” women of society would

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<sup>91</sup> Cornelia Usborne includes a chapter on abortion in film, theater, and literature in Weimar Germany. She does not mention *Close Up* since her focus is on Germany, but she shows how abortion was a sensationalist topic that appeared in many German films between 1918 and 1934. She concludes that the overall popular culture of the period “depicted abortion, and even pregnancy, as a negative experience” and the filmmakers and writers tended to paint “a stereotypical unsympathetic portrait of lay abortionists” (53).

<sup>92</sup> The private viewing must have been a home viewing with Bryher, Macpherson, H.D., and Perdita in attendance, since Bryher notes that the film was rented for a “private showing. . . on a home projector” and that they “collected all the cinema enthusiasts” they knew, “and one child for the good of its education” (42-43).

avoid their “duty” to become mothers out of a fear of childbirth. Bryher touched on this when she chided:

I know it is an unwritten rule that the difficulties of child-birth are never to be mentioned before unmarried women because of their possible effect upon the birth-rate. But is this any way to deal with the problem? If money spent on building one cruiser or training one army division were to be devoted to research into the problem of painless child-birth probably many of the problems would be solved at this time. After all, a soldier is not expected to go into action without knowing that a state of war exists and that enemies are in front of him. And hiding the facts will never help towards solution of the problem. (44-45)

Bryher argued that instead of hiding what happens to women’s bodies during birth, women should be educated to understand the changes that their bodies will go through during pregnancy and childbirth, like a soldier being trained before going to war.<sup>93</sup> She also argued for government funding for research into “painless child-birth.” Although it is unclear what she meant by this, whether research into drugs or obstetric anesthesia, or more natural means, it is clear from her argument that as of May 1929, the problem had not been solved by twilight sleep, for example. Bryher was clearly calling for women’s education and suggesting that film might be a medium for such sex education if it were not restricted and censored.

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<sup>93</sup> Remarkably, this is not unlike a much later, second-wave feminist demand for women to take back knowledge of their bodies from the medical establishment. See Kline, *Bodies of Knowledge*.

In her contribution to “Six Russian Films,” Bryher reviewed Pavlov and Pudovkin’s educational medical film, *Mechanics of the Brain*, which exhibited various animal and human experiments to show how the brain is involved in stimulus response. Referring to a part of the film that was later cut out of the US version (which ran only sixty minutes, compared to the ninety-minute runtime of the original Russian version), Bryher exclaimed that “the greatest part of the film began with the close up of a woman’s face during childbirth” (29).<sup>94</sup> Bryher read the birthing mother’s expression as one of complete and utter fear and pain:

It was fear complete in a single face; more full of pain and terror and helplessness than anything ever written or imagined. It is not generally realized that (perhaps because of sexual taboos and inhibition) progress in painless childbirth has been neglected and research into these matters has not kept pace with modern medical development. Perhaps Russia, with these pictures and with these great efforts to educate along constructive lines will produce some scientists able to investigate the subject. (30)

Again, Bryher called for research on painless childbirth. Her hope was that if Russia was open enough to produce such educational films that looked at taboo subjects like

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<sup>94</sup> A clip of this shot can be seen on “The Virtual Laboratory: Essays and Resources on the Experimentalization of Life,” <http://vlp.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/essays/data/art5> [accessed 31 May 2012], a website hosted by the Max Planck Institute of the History of Science, Berlin. The film is not available on DVD, but one can find digital versions online. The scene with the birthing mother does not appear in the shorter versions of the film available on US websites like YouTube and Vimeo, which include English intertitles, confirming that they are not from the original Russian version.



childbirth, then perhaps it could also produce scientists to research ways to alleviate the “complete” “pain and terror” of the birthing mother.<sup>95</sup>

Bryher judged the film an “immense value” to students and nowhere questioned the ethics of experimenting on animals and human beings and filming it (30). She was apparently not troubled at all by the vivisection captured on film. As one popular periodical, reviewing a 2001 revival of Pudovkin films, describes it: “Very deliberately and repetitively, the film shows us what happens when you electrocute a frog: here, now here, and this is what happens when you sever its spinal cord . . . see, the back legs no longer respond” (Jones).<sup>96</sup> Bryher casually glossed over such disturbing footage. Although the human beings in the film do not appear to be treated as inhumanely as the animals, Bryher seemed unaware of any concept of medical ethics in her review of the film. Bryher was apparently concerned that women’s health issues did not get adequate research funding or attention, but she did not seem to be concerned that such research would require test subjects, animals and human, for experimentation. The tension between women’s individual bodily rights and the good of the body politic was implied, however unconsciously, in Bryher’s articles on medical films. Such a tension was central

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<sup>95</sup> Although *Close Up*, in its lauding of Russian film, gives much consideration to Russian film editing (see “Russian Cutting,” for example), Bryher apparently does not make any association between the birthing mother’s “pain and fear” supposedly captured on film and the “Kuleshov Effect.” The Kuleshov Effect refers to the power of film editing to convey meaning upon an actor’s facial expression. It comes from the film experiments of Lev Kuleshov, Pudovkin’s teacher, who intercut a close-up of an actor’s expressionless face with different shots of objects. Depending on the object following the close-up of the face, audiences interpreted the actor’s expression to convey different meaning, even though the close-up was the exact same shot in each instance. So, if a bowl of soup appeared, the audience thought the actor was conveying an expression of hunger; if a growling dog appeared, the audience interpreted the actor’s expression as one of fear. In other words, Bryher knows that this is a childbirth scene so she interprets the birthing mother’s expressions as ones of utter pain, terror, and helplessness. What might happen if the close-ups on her face were intercut with images of the woman crossing the finish line of a marathon or winning a prize? If the context were different, would the viewer interpret the woman’s expressions differently?

<sup>96</sup> See J. Jones.

both to H.D.'s personal experience with abortion and with the abortion debate in general in the eugenic period. Bryher directly engaged in the debate by reviewing popular films on the topic of abortion elsewhere in the pages of *Close Up*.

In the year after H.D.'s abortion, *Close Up* repeatedly referenced and wrote about two Russian films on the subject of abortion, Abram Room's *Bed and Sofa* (1927) and Noi Galkin and Grigor Lemberg's controversial *Abort* (1924).<sup>97</sup> The plot of *Bed and Sofa* runs parallel to H.D.'s personal situation in some ways, as it centers on an unplanned pregnancy resulting from a love triangle. But unlike H.D., the wife in the film decides at the last moment to keep her baby, fleeing the overcrowded city and both her husband and lover.<sup>98</sup> Bryher's *Film Problems* reading of the film is telling in terms of her involvement in H.D.'s abortion. While she saw *Bed and Sofa* as "one of the greatest films of the world," she took issue with the plot development that has the wife decide not to go through with the abortion and instead move to the country to raise her baby on her own (75). Bryher called the scenario that culminates in an unplanned pregnancy resulting from a love affair a common occurrence that "happens over and over again in other countries"—not just Soviet Russia, where the housing shortage forced wives to live in close

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<sup>97</sup> Bryher also writes about the films in her 1929 *Film Problems of Soviet Russia*.

<sup>98</sup> The love triangle in the film is brought about by Moscow's housing shortage. The husband and wife (played by Nicolai Batalof and Liudmila Semenova) live together in a small room. When the husband runs into an old friend who is looking for housing on his way to work one day, he invites the friend to live with him and his wife and sleep on their sofa. At first, the wife, who had previously expressed displeasure and boredom with her role as housewife, is dismayed to have yet another man to have to care for and clean up after. But when the husband is called away for work, the wife and the friend begin an affair. When the husband returns (with a giant basket of berries), he finds that the friend has moved from the sofa to the bed. Having nowhere to go, the husband reluctantly finds his place on the sofa—there is a housing shortage after all. The film depicts the threesome living like this for some time, and eventually the wife finds she feels unwell and realizes she is pregnant. Since, as Bryher is careful to point out, abortion is legal under some circumstances in Russia at the time, she gets the necessary paperwork and goes to the hospital to terminate the pregnancy (*Film Problems* 74). At the last moment, the wife sees a child playing with a doll outside the hospital window, and changes her mind about terminating the pregnancy. She leaves Moscow for the country and plans to raise the baby on her own.

quarters with men other than their husbands (74). But the wife's decision to have the child, Bryher insisted,

. . . is just what that kind of woman in that kind of circumstance would not have done. She would not have wanted a child born of such tangled, resentful happenings, for the child's own sake. The passive neglect and ignoring of all her feelings by the husband led to the circumstance: probably the solution would have been to have left Moscow with the other man. The maternal instinct of the woman had led her to re-admit the husband. No, circumstances were too involved for her to have had the baby. (74-75)

It is difficult not to read Bryher's personal involvement with H.D. and Macpherson and the abortion into her reading of the film and disbelief in the ending.

*Close Up's* coverage of the film included two articles in the May 1929 issue: "*Bed and Sofa* at the Film Society," attributed to A. W., and "Note on *Bed and Sofa*," attributed to H. C., printed one right after the other.<sup>99</sup> Like Bryher, A. W. referred to the director as Alexander Room, when his first name was actually Abram. A. W.'s review echoed Bryher's point that the predicament the wife finds herself in is common: these are "perfectly natural, normal people, wrestling with perfectly natural normal problems" (59). And A. W. lauded the feminist message of the film: "Woman is equal to man, says

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<sup>99</sup> The author of the latter might be either Hay Chowl or Hugh Castle, both of whom contribute multiple articles in 1929. However, the former might be Bryher herself, whose given names are Annie Winifred, since I cannot find any other contributor with the same initials. (She is always only credited with her initials.) There is another *Close Up* article by Hay Chowl that playfully claims to "plagiarize" from a previously printed H.D. article. In *The H.D. Book*, Duncan points to this passage as an example of the intimacy of *Close Up* contributors.

Room. Woman must be free, independent; the old moral traditions of masculine superiority are wrong. Overcrowding must be abolished, says Room. A new life, a free life, based on complete social equality” (60). But A. W. read the ending differently: “Everything is heading for a crisis, a break-down, but Liudmila takes a decision, the only decision possible, and leaves it all, sets out to start a new life” (60). Unlike Bryher in *Film Problems*, A.W. read the ending as feminist and uplifting, and overall admired the film, even though, she noted, “The Film Society copy was cut, of course” (60).

H. C.’s review of the film was not so positive, calling the screening of the film “somewhat of a disappointment” because “the society’s officers had been practicing for distinction and honours in censoring. The main import of the theme (the sole reason for the film being made at all) had been excised entirely” (61). The abortion had been cut out of a film about abortion. H. C. quoted the reasons given for the excision: “English convention forbids public reference” to abortion, “and it was accordingly removed before submission to the Board” (61). H. C. was incredulous and reminded readers that the film was in fact an anti-abortion film—the wife, after all, decides to keep the baby in the end. In fact, his main criticism of the film was that it was propagandistic. He took issue with Room’s cheap method of using “film stock to express his disapproval of abortion, whether or not the circumstances make abortion necessary or even the lesser of two evils” (62). H. C. didn’t like that the “wife of the story is scared away from the abortion clinic and her resolve by screams from the operating theater. In making an appeal to the impulse of fear, Room not only descended to the propaganda level. . . but to slyness and deception too” (62). So, where A. W. read the ending as feminist because it closes with Liudmila embracing her independence and imminent motherhood while fleeing the city

along with her role as a the domestic caretaker of two men, H. C. found it antifeminist in its propagandistic anti-abortion message. Women should have the reproductive freedom, H. C. implies, to procure safe abortions if necessary. Thus, the pages of *Close Up* contain a public debate about the abortion issue through its review of films about abortion.

Similar themes of the abortion controversy, which include the tension between women's individual rights versus the good of the body politic, come up in *Close Up's* coverage of the film *Abort*. The controversial Russian film no longer exists, but we have references to it in *Close Up* and in Bryher's *Film Problems*.<sup>100</sup> A year after H.D.'s abortion, in the December 1929 issue of *Close Up*, there appeared a "report" on a screening of the film, written in heroic couplets and attributed to Norma Mahl. It is likely that "Norma Mahl" is a pseudonym, a play on "normal" or even "normal male." I would guess that Norma Mahl was a name assumed by one of the *Close Up* editors or regular contributors to provide a tongue-in-cheek poetical invective against censorship. It is possible Norma Mahl was in fact H.D., who took on multiple pseudonyms in her writing life.<sup>101</sup> But it is perhaps a pseudonym for Macpherson, or more likely Bryher. The arguments made in the poem echo the arguments Bryher makes in her other *Close Up* writing on educational films. And Bryher is *Close Up's* go-to person for anything related

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<sup>100</sup> In *Film Problems*, Bryher lists *The Abortion* as an example of an educational film dealing with sociological problems (124). Taylor and Christie's *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents* includes a 1925 article by Anatoli Goldobin, which claims that the "scientific" film "had broken all the records set by foreign hits" (124).

<sup>101</sup> Adalaide Morris writes about the array of H.D.'s pseudonyms, which include "Helga Dart," "Helga Dorn," "Rhoda Peter," "D.A. Hill," "John Helforth," and "Delia Alton," to name a few, as protective masks meant to hide her real identity when writing experimental literature with socially unacceptable themes

to medical, science, or educational film. Even if Norma Mahl was not actually one of the editorial three, the poem was endorsed by them simply by appearing in the journal.<sup>102</sup>

The poem begins by casting London as a virtuous female figure being threatened by “free-thinkers” who “in her chastest hall, given to recitals, / Probe at her heart, her blood, her vitals” by screening *Abort* at “the Whigmore Hall” (471-2). The poem’s metaphors conflate rape and abortion, which both violate the virtuous female London. The simple screening of a film about abortion in London’s finest music hall violates the feminized city, constituting a kind of rape, which might lead to a pregnancy and necessitate abortion. The line, “probe at her heart, her blood, her vitals,” might also describe abortion itself. The probing, both a rape and an abortion, must be done in secret. The varying refrain, “Much secrecy. The film cannot be shown,” and “Much secrecy. A film behind closed doors” stress that the film has been banned and is not supposed to be shown in public; nevertheless, “Once more into the breeches we have stormed,” again using rape imagery to describe the illicit screening of the film. And, indeed, once the film is finally shown, it is revealed to be just as cut up as London’s violated female body.

The speaker struggles to make out the plot of the “mutilated” copy, beginning with “rather confusing shots of factory hands/ Reading a notice. No one understands—” The stanza goes on to recount what it can make out of the plot of the film: “But that the girl is expectant is quite clear. / She leaves the table, holding a handkerchief. Feels sick. / Expert in the audience, ‘nausea’. Rather quick?” (475). And a little later:

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including lesbian love (124). Ezra Pound, too, was known to adopt the pseudonym “Alfred Venison” in order to take on public issues. See Witemeyer 169.

<sup>102</sup> The above is just speculation, of course. A forensic literary investigation à la Donald Foster would be fun and useful here.

Midwife again. Illegal operation.

Borne to the hospital in consternation. . . .

Desperation. . . students round like flies. . . .

And while the case is told them, patient dies. . . .

A student finds a handkerchief and cries. . . (476)

All ellipses are original, signaling the confusing cuts in the film and the speaker's attempts to piece the narrative back together. The newly edited version of the film that the speaker is viewing focuses on the girls' botched illegal abortions and death, vilifies the midwife, and establishes safe abortion as the domain of the sympathetic medical profession. Even though the film does not provide details on the so-called safe method of abortion, it establishes medical professionals as the experts. As the poem goes on, more parallels between the botched abortion and the mutilated film emerge.

It is not just the cutting of the film that makes it incomprehensible, but the projection and screening as well. The film is "out of focus," and then:

[. . .] Film breaks, amid sighs:

Lights please. The screen's moved. Really, what's more free

Than move an entire screen when you can't see

As this strange woman did, while we all wait?

An expert explains. "Emulsion at the gate".

He's kidding us? O, no. Kid liver oil. . .

Where was I now? O, yes, the goil.

She's dead, through ignorance and kiss.

Really! We ask, what do we learn from this. . . (476)

Like the botched abortion that leaves the young “goil” dead, there are complications with projecting the film that have damaging results. “Emulsion at the gate” refers to the emulsion on the print side of film that sometimes sloughs off when going through the projector and builds up at the film gate, causing the film to go in and out of focus and possibly break. Likening the material of film to the human body, the speaker mentions “kid liver oil,” a play on “cod liver oil” a dietary supplement or lubricant that also comes in the form of an emulsion, used to counteract certain deficiencies and wasting diseases.<sup>103</sup> The “expert” screening the film is just as dubious as the criminal midwife in the film. She too is a “strange woman.” The film's materiality makes it just as vulnerable to abuse and violation as the girl in the film, whose bodily capacity for reproduction proves fatal.

And that is the message the censored version of the film wants to get across. The speaker attends the screening expecting a scientific film about abortion, but instead she gets propaganda. She expects an educational experience. But when the film is finally projected, it only reveals a “harmful” method of abortion:

The film starts, after a russian [sic] doctor's said

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<sup>103</sup> This according to nineteenth-century medical literature. See Shrady.



It shows the harmful way to bring to bed

But not the right, germany [sic] won't allow it

(And it's a german [sic] copy). Why, then, show it? (475)

Why even bother? Well, as other articles in the censorship issue of *Close Up* have made abundantly clear, film is a powerful tool for propaganda. The intension of screening this version of the film is to present abortion as horrific and deadly and to plant fear in viewers' psyches:

Girl buys book, where diagrams proclaim

The flowering of fruit that was Eve's shame.

One has not come to look at something pleasant

But surely these would wound an adolescent,

Put him off any sex-life? Visual probes,

These large cold diagrams; they'd set up phobes[. . .] (476)

The film is meant to turn the viewer off sex, doing away with the need for abortion altogether.

The speaker sees film's potential, and makes a plea for sex education through film. In the third stanza, the speaker claims to go to the screening, "not to leer, but learn":

So to confront the night of ignorance, we creep

Waving old beacons lit by twilight sleep,

Dreaming on earth for a terrestrial heaven

Where life's clock no more stands at sex to seven.<sup>104</sup>

The reference to twilight sleep is remarkable and significant. Twilight sleep, as we have seen in the previous two chapters, refers to the obstetrical anesthesia of combining morphine and scopolamine, an amnesiac, during childbirth and other obstetric procedures, including medical abortion, with the purpose of erasing women's memories of the experience. The implication is that under twilight sleep, even women who have given birth or experienced medical abortion would not know anything about what happened to their bodies during the procedure. Thus, even women with personal experience with abortion or pregnancy and birth would benefit from a film teaching them about the procedure.

Several stanzas are devoted to the speaker's arrival at the screening hall and the other filmgoers, whom the speaker depicts disparagingly as both sexually deviant and infertile:

A flaxen female, stressed in red foulard,

Proves you can still be feminine and hard.

We notice spinsters, busy making hay

From withered grass not cut while it was May.

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<sup>104</sup> "Sex" to seven is the author's original spelling, punning on the idiomatic "at sixes and sevens," which indicates a state of confusion and carelessness.

Phyl, who wed Will, would float around with Sidney,

Who'd find love free, but for a floating kidney;

Next her, an Indian, who'd love *all* with freedom

If they would only recognize his he-dom;

Scrawny old men, devoid of sex at all,

But thinking this should let them lead the ball. . . (473)

Whether they are androgynous, aged, or alien, the audience members may be interested in sex (more interested in leering than learning?) but they are in the speaker's view asexual and incapable of reproduction. The speaker's point is that, like the women subjected to twilight sleep mentioned in the third stanza, the audience members could benefit from education about sexual reproduction and abortion.

The speaker concludes by sarcastically calling the film one of "sex-reform," and adds it to the list of films that are used as propaganda against abortion, including *Bed and Sofa* (477). She also aptly points to eugenics as the larger arena of the contemporary abortion debate, first figuratively with her word choice used to describe the secret screening of the film early in the poem, and then, as we shall see in a moment, through direct argument about the poor quality and redundancy of the abortion films she lists toward the end of the poem. First:

The lights dim prematurely. Ssh, *that* word!

It'll stamp you retrogressive if you're heard.

The lights go out. This time they're meant to. Here

Is the Abortion film, so raise a cheer.

A chair? No! No, ABORTION. Can't you hear?

"Not very well. . . heredity. . . in one ear".

Audience members had better not be heard using words like "premature," as in "induced premature labor" (another term for abortion), or they'll be labeled "retrogressive."

"Heredity" also clues us into the larger eugenic argument pushed within the abortion debate. Eugenics, as we've seen in previous chapters, is all about "progress." It is the social duty of "fit" mothers to pass along their genes, and of "unfit" mothers to refrain from doing so.

The speaker finds the eugenic argument tedious, especially when it's hammered in over and over in propaganda films:

What do we see we haven't seen before?

Why give these babes on jerries this encore?

These tedious views of children being dressed!

Why in this film, when they're in all the rest?

Did they take feet and feet of this and put it in

Whenever any film is looking thin?

Why bring it over here, when there are others

So much more modern teaching more to mothers

Of every class? . . .

The speaker explains it is as if all films on abortion add stock footage of healthy adorable babies and children to remind potential mothers of the potential life they are “destroying” through abortion. Pictures of fat babies should make any woman choose not to abort. This is what happens at the end of *Bed and Sofa*, which Bryher objected to in her *Film Problems* reading of the film: Liudmila sees an adorable child playing with a doll and hears screams from the abortion clinic, so she runs off to the country to have her baby.

But as she harshly criticizes the film, the speaker wonders, as she continues the stanza:

[. . .]Are we just snobs, to lord

We who have seen the new ones, when they can’t afford

To visit Berlin (it is SO expensive?)

Maybe. But freedom is extensive [. . .] (477)

“We” can afford to travel to Berlin to see films of better quality than this: uncensored, intact films, as Bryher, Macpherson, and H.D. frequently did. “We” can also afford to travel to Berlin for an abortion if necessary. Not “every class” of woman can afford to go where “freedom is extensive” in order to have reproductive control. And then, of course, the irony is that freedom for women is not really extensive anywhere (not even in Berlin)

when reproductive choice and the right to vote is limited. Even in cases like H.D.'s where women have the wealth and connections to procure an abortion, freedom is limited.

H.D.'s Berlin abortion cannot be read as an example of her complete reproductive control, as it was overdetermined by the desires of her partners, Bryher and Macpherson. H.D. does not even write freely about abortion. Where Bryher and Macpherson frequently write about abortion films, giving their opinions about women's bodies and women's rights, H.D.'s writing shies away from the topic almost altogether. However, as we shall see in the next section, H.D.'s *Close Up* writing finds covert ways to take on the sociological problems of women, especially through her celebration of Pabst's films like *Joyless Street* and through her complicated reading of Carl Th. Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*.

#### IV. H.D.'s *Close Up* Writing and the Brutalized Female Body in/of Film

In "An Appreciation," her homage to G. W. Pabst, published in *Close Up* in March 1929, H.D. describes meeting the director in a Kurfürstendamm café in mid-December (while she was still in Berlin recuperating after her abortion). The piece opens with H.D. describing a very depressed Pabst, who eventually confesses his dismay over just having seen Carl Th. Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. Pabst gapes at the "technique," "originality," and "grandeur" of the French "experiment," and worries that "here in Germany" he is not given the freedom to do such "[t]hings" ("Appreciation" 140). H.D. refers back to her previous review of Dreyer's *Joan*, reminding readers that

while she agrees with Pabst's assessment of Dreyer's technique, her July 1928 take on the film was quite different, especially in comparison with Pabst's own work:

*Jeanne D'Arc*. . . set me out of key. It positively bullied me as no film has yet done. I was forced to pity, pity, pity. My affections and credulity were hammered. I was kicked. I was throttled. I was laid upon a torture rack. Quite solemnly I was burned at the stake and lifting my eyes to heaven I had forgiven my malefactors. Yes, the magnificent technique of Dreyer did that for me. (143)

Dreyer's technique pulls the spectator in and places her in the position of the brutalized Joan. H.D. condemns the film for using its perfect technique so inhumanely and praises Pabst's ability to infuse his women characters with life instead: "I love and always will love the most modest feminine creation of this Viennese cher-maître. . ." (143). She continues a little later: "All the women of Herr Pabst's creation, be it a simple super in a crowd scene or a waitress in a restaurant, have 'another side' to them" (143).

While H.D. did not explicitly write about her own bodily experience of the abortion that she had just undergone, "An Appreciation" is concerned with not only the portrayal and treatment of women in film, but also how such portrayals impact spectators, especially female spectators. H.D.'s *Close Up* writing continually questions the sufficiency of aesthetics, namely "technique," if it fails to promote social and humanitarian causes, which for H.D. are also feminist causes. H.D. does not write about her own body or her own abortion, but her *Close Up* writing centers on films that put women and women's bodies on display. "An Appreciation" gives us our cue to compare

Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and Pabst's *Joyless Street*, as H.D. does in her film writing. Both films use close-ups and special editing techniques, but to very different ends, as H.D. points out. H.D. uses her reading of these two films to make a larger feminist argument about women's bodily rights in the eugenic period and about the place of modernist art in such political debates. Ultimately, for H.D., modernist art—here film art, later poetry—must be political, must remedy and repair social problems like woman's negative position.

The title that H.D., Bryher, and Macpherson chose for their journal is indicative of their larger project. As Anne Friedberg tells us in her introduction to the *Close Up* anthology, “‘close up’ was a technical term for magnification through a lens, but also—more metaphorically—it meant close analysis, scrutiny, an ‘optic’. To many, the close-up played a critical role in the wholly new visual rhetoric. . . The close-up provided a particularly modern optic, a newly revelatory epistemology. As the title for a film journal, *Close Up* implied the conflation of technical specificity with philosophical endeavor” (Friedberg 1-3). As the governing metaphor for their project, the close-up represented the editors' interest in scrutinizing contemporary film culture in order to oppose the dominant forms of cinema production of the day. H.D. used *Close Up* as a means to critique patriarchal culture. As a film critic she could scrutinize the films by the likes of Dreyer and Pabst to make larger arguments about the social position of women in the eugenic period. She could also promote films that she saw as advancing women's social position.



For H.D., *Joyless Street* was a “cinematic touchstone” that she wrote about multiple times in *Close Up*, often calling it up as the exemplar to which all other films should be compared (Marcus 96).<sup>105</sup> The film’s plot consists of three women’s (Grete, Maria, and Else) intersecting storylines, all taking place in depressed, post-war Vienna. Grete (Greta Garbo) is the eldest daughter of a widowed pensioner, who narrowly resists being lured into prostitution by Madame Greifer, the owner of an upscale dress boutique that is also a cover for a nightclub and brothel. Madame Greifer’s nightclub is the social center where post-war profiteers and speculators gather and collude while the masses starve on the streets outside. Some of these speculators, who are seen carousing in the nightclub, come up with a plot to report a fake strike at a mine to drive down the price of stock, so they can buy it cheaply. Grete’s father has traded his entire pension for stock in the company and will lose everything if the plot succeeds. When she thinks they have lost everything, Grete turns to Madame Greifer, who had been kind to her (albeit with ulterior motives) for help. Madame Greifer agrees to help by giving Grete a job as an entertainer/participant in the nightclub’s tableau vivant. When Grete agrees, she is made to wear a bejeweled gown that exposes her breasts. As she is getting ready in the dressing room, she is attacked and almost raped by one of the club’s patrons, but her father and Davy, the American Red Cross humanitarian relief worker (and Grete’s love interest), interrupt before her virtue can be compromised. Maria’s storyline, which Patrice Petro writes about in detail, involves her love for Egon, one of the speculators involved with the mining plot. Egon uses Maria, and then tosses her aside for Lia, one of Madame Greifer’s girls. When Maria learns of their romantic involvement, she sneaks into Lia’s

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<sup>105</sup> Bryher and Macpherson, as well as other *Close Up* contributors, also wrote frequently about Pabst’s films in the journal. See Friedberg 19-23 for a summary of Pabst’s relationship with *Close Up*.

room and strangles her in a jealous rage. Else, whose story I will detail below, is Maria's friend who lives in the attic of Madame Greifer's building with her baby and husband. When her family is on the verge of starvation, Else is forced by the corrupt butcher to exchange sex for meat, which ultimately leads to violence and her own demise, as we shall see below.<sup>106</sup>

*Joyless Street* is one of the films whose excessive censoring *Close Up* continually protested.<sup>107</sup> For example, in her June 1928 "How I Would Start a Film Club," Bryher noted that the film had recently been shown "in a mutilated form" (Donald, Friedberg, and Marcus 291). The film, which offers a realist portrayal of post-World War I Vienna and the dismal social situations resulting from inflation in that period, was heavily censored.<sup>108</sup> Once again, the mutilation of the film itself as described in *Close Up*

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<sup>106</sup> IMDB provides an even more detailed synopsis: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0015842/synopsis> [Accessed 6 June 2012.]

<sup>107</sup> In the December 1927 "As Is," *Close Up*'s regular editorial, Macpherson recounts the story of the film's excessive cutting by the censors: "Pabst was talking to me about this film, and the story is tragic by good. Germany would not back him, and eventually money was forthcoming from France. He made the film in thirty-four days working sixteen hours a day. When completed it was ten thousand feet in length, roughly the same as *Ben Hur* or *The Big Parade*. France, on accepting it belatedly, promptly slashed out a couple thousand feet as well as every single "shot" of the street itself. Since then bits have been added and bits have been taken away. Vienna, for no discoverable reason, extracted all the Werner Krauss sequences, so that he did not appear in the film at all. Russia found it necessary to turn the American lieutenant into a doctor, and turned Krauss into the murderer instead of the girl. Finally, after having run a year in Germany, an attempt was made to censor it there. In England at the film society it hung together in shreds. But of course in Switzerland, when it was shown, most of the English left the theater. In England, naturally, there are no 'questionable houses'. The English felt they ought to imply this. So they left. America next clears its throat and utters. America says 'This is not real' and 'This is not true'. All America, of course, lived in Vienna just after the war, the whole of it, so it ought to know. A mere Viennese wouldn't. However, the best thing really is to do as England did. It didn't mutilate. It cut it out altogether. And one thing I know is that England (no not that class that walks out in Switzerland, but the workers) given the film straight would be the first to praise it. But the mediators and others say no" (7-8).

<sup>108</sup> As a result of the censorship going on in various countries, as described by Macpherson above, there have been at least two (probably many more) versions of the film circulating. One version, which was distributed overseas, is drastically shorter—about an hour and a half shorter—than the original version of the film. This overseas version completely cut out Maria's entire murder plot and most of the overt prostitution in the film. This is probably similar to the recent version that has been available on DVD in the US. While it focuses on Greta Garbo's plotline, it leaves out most of the uglier social realities. The US

parallels the brutalization of women's bodies. What is striking about *Joyless Street* is how it centers on bodies—listening bodies, sexualized bodies, abused bodies, maimed bodies, starving bodies, nursing bodies—perhaps as much as Dreyer focuses on Joan's tortured body, as we will see below. Although *Joyless Street* depicts starvation, murder, oppression, and, especially, prostitution, H.D. found it preferable to *Joan* because she saw the female leads as being vibrant and alive. The film offers several women's intersecting stories, which nonjudgmentally show how women are pushed into selling their bodies in depression-era Vienna. The point in telling these women's stories is to protest their negative social position.

In most of H.D.'s writing about *Joyless Street*, she focused on Greta Garbo's acting and storyline, reading her character as a virtuous and pure Helen figure that emerges from a dismal postwar Vienna untouched by the vice that surrounds her: Grete is "Helen walking scatheless among execrating warriors, the plague, distress, famine" ("Beauty" 109). Whereas H.D. wrote impressionistically and effusively about Grete, she was silent about the other female characters in the film, whose storylines leave them less intact. Although H.D. was not explicit about Pabst's shots of women's body parts, it is this technique that allows the film to critique women's negative social position. By focusing on body parts, Pabst implicitly and ironically claims full humanity for his brutalized women characters. I will look at three different intersecting uses of women's

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VHS version of the film is almost a half hour longer, but it too is not complete. Filmmuseum Munich released a new reconstructed edition of the film in 2009, which is based on contemporary secondary sources of the period and which may be a closer approximation of the original version released in 1925. (See [http://www.edition-filmmuseum.com/product\\_info.php/language/en/info/p81\\_Die-freudlose-Gasse.html](http://www.edition-filmmuseum.com/product_info.php/language/en/info/p81_Die-freudlose-Gasse.html) [Accessed September 19, 2012.]) It is 151 minutes long as opposed to 61 minutes. This newly restored version is likely very similar to the version H.D. first saw, and it is the version that I am writing about here.

bodies and body parts—anonymous women’s legs, Marie’s ears and turning and leaning head, and Else’s bare chest as she nurses her baby. In addition to his close-ups on body parts, Pabst’s editing of the film, unlike Dreyer’s editing of *Joan*, relies on continuity editing, cutting on movement and producing a fluid effect.<sup>109</sup> Although H.D. never wrote about this technical feature, it is what allows Pabst to imbue his women characters with “life,” and it is what allows the film to stand as a kind of feminist cultural critique.

If, as one critic has pointed out, Grete and Maria represent two sides of the same coin, two women forced into an impossible situation, where one remains virtuous and the other gives into vice, Else’s character is an amalgam of vice and virtue.<sup>110</sup> Like Maria’s, Else’s story is a cautionary tale. Else is the quintessential sacrificing mother, and the crimes and improprieties she commits are to save her baby and family. Several times in the film she is seen breastfeeding her child, a visual allusion to the Virgin Mary. Every unseemly act she commits is set against this parallel, suggesting that postwar social ills would drive the most virtuous of women to extremes. Hers is a functional, living body until near-starvation gets in the way of her milk production. The film’s opening scene shows how it is the job of all three women to nurture their family by providing them with food, even if they are not mothers like Else. Grete cares for her retired father and sister; Maria is berated by her war-veteran father and her mother for failing to provide for them;

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<sup>109</sup> Macpherson writes explicitly about Pabst’s editing technique in his December 1927 “Die Liebe Der Jeanne Ney”: Pabst reveals to Macpherson that “there are two thousand cuts in the entire film” of *Jeanne Ney*. “As I saw it,” Macpherson continues, “one was not conscious of any. When I said this he explained his method. ‘Every cut is made on some movement. At the end of one cut somebody is moving, at the beginning of the adjoining one the movement is continued. The eye is thus so occupied in following these movements that it misses the cuts’” (26).

<sup>110</sup> Patrice Petro reads Grete and Maria against each other as two sides of the same coin, but does not consider Else’s character at all. It is possible that she is reading a version of the film that cuts down or edits out altogether Else’s story.

and Else frequently nurses her baby as her husband stands by her side. The three women gather in the opening scene to stand on line at the butcher's to wait for meat. The butcher, who clearly has all the power in Melchior Alley, the joyless street, emerges to announce that there is no meat left for the gathering mass of hungry people.

The butcher, played by Werner Krauss, who would later become Nazi Germany's most celebrated actor, is the oppressive male chauvinist villain who exploits women, forcing them to prostitute themselves in exchange for meat. Pabst highlights this exploitation through his depiction of their bodies. For example, a lingering shot of women's legs becomes a kind of shorthand in the film to indicate sexuality. In the second reel/Act 2, after the butcher refuses to sell more meat to the starving residents of Melchior Street, Maria and Else witness two other women knock on the butcher's door to solicit him. The shot captures their legs displayed for the butcher in front of his basement window then moves vertically as it cuts to the butcher, who eyes the legs through his window frame before motioning the women to come inside. Maria and Else, desperate and hungry, follow the women's example and knock on the butcher's door.

Once inside, we are given a wide shot of the interior of the butcher's shop. The butcher, a burly man with thick dark hair and a handlebar mustache, and his Great Dane move freely about the space, in which the two women timidly huddle. In the background, there is an open door to the meat locker, where several butchered carcasses hang from meat hooks. The butcher gazes downward at Else's body, and we are given a close-up, from above, of the lower portion of her legs, after which we cut to the butcher's pleased expression, echoing the earlier scene of the butcher eying the prostitutes' legs through the

window. The butcher motions for Else to go with him into the meat locker; she follows, and he closes the door behind them. Maria's expression implies what is happening behind the closed door. She waits outside the meat locker door, fidgeting until she is apparently startled by a sound. With her back still to the door, she faces the camera, and her eyes widen as she hears what we can only imagine is going on behind the door. She leans her ear toward the door of the meat locker to hear better, and her expression registers shock and dismay. An instant later, the door opens, and Else emerges, shoulders hunched and head down in a posture of shame. She keeps her back to the butcher, as he emerges from the meat locker after her with a large slab of meat. He begins cutting the meat with a knife, and then hacks off a piece with a cleaver. He hands it to Else, payment for her sexual favors. This exchange crudely equates women's bodies with meat: flesh for flesh. Else's body is reduced to its sexual function as she is reduced to an object with no human subjectivity.

Else's subjugation eventually leads her to near-starvation, which drives her to murder in the climactic scenes of the film. When she can no longer nurse her baby because she herself is too malnourished, Else fights back against her oppressor. In the scene, which is crosscut with Grete's near-rape scene (Grete, as H.D. emphasizes, remains unscathed), Else is seen trying unsuccessfully to nurse. The intertitle tells us that she can produce no more milk, and she is going to go back to the butcher to get meat. When she arrives at the butcher's, he refuses her since he has already used her for sex and she no longer has the same value to him. This sends her into a hysterical rage, and she pushes her way into his shop. As with their previous encounter, we do not see what happens behind closed doors. We only see the mob gathering outside—no longer content

simply to stand and wait, they buzz about. Then, abruptly, through the window where we previously saw the butcher looking out at the women's legs, we see the butcher popping up with his cleaver sticking out of his bleeding head! Just after turning his weapon against him, Else bursts out of the door and runs hysterically back to her attic hovel. In the final shots of the film, the building that houses both the brothel/night club and Else's attic apartment goes up in flames. (Earlier, we had seen burning cigarettes left by the evacuating nightclub patrons.) As the building is burning, Else and her husband lower the baby down through the attic window to the crowd below. The film ends with the crowd taking over the care of the infant just before Else and her husband burn.<sup>111</sup>

Else and Maria, the two characters that give in to vice in order to survive and care for their families, enter into states of murderous rage by the film's end. The only recourse they have against their oppressors is hysteria and murder. They are beaten, exploited, raped, their bodies brutalized and equated with meat; but, unlike Grete, who narrowly avoids rape and prostitution, Else ends up bludgeoning and mutilating her male tormentor, and Maria murders her sexual competitor. H.D. said little of all this; however, in "The Cinema and the Classics I: Beauty," she called the film's depiction of starvation, prostitution, and murder a "reality" that people "dare not face," but she remained silent about the specifics of the fate of the women on the screen. "Things happen," she continued, "we have known them to happen" (109). But it seems H.D. couldn't quite face the brutality depicted on the screen. And despite the graphic nature of the film, H.D. continually read it as uplifting, viewing Pabst's women as vibrant and alive.

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<sup>111</sup> Both *Joan* and *Joyless* end with women being burned to death, a total obliteration of the body, apparently the consequence for their unconventional and forceful actions.

In “An Appreciation,” H.D. questioned Pabst about the body of the murdered woman (Lia) on the floor at the scene of the crime in the film. H.D. “had seen a still of a dead body, a very beautiful still of the figure of the mundane lady who, you will recall, is killed in the ‘house’ she went to with her lover” (147), but she couldn’t recall that shot when she saw the scene in the cinema itself. H.D. asked Pabst, “I wanted to know about that body of Madame----- . . . I was wondering about it.’ Mr. Pabst did not wait for me to explain fully, he burst into a torrent of wailing and apology. ‘O, a dead body. . . a dead body. . . there is no such thing as a dead body on the screen’” (147). H.D. recalled how she “saw *Joyless Street* a second time. It was only last year. Then I did make a point of looking for the dead body and I did see it. The first time I was so enchanted with light filtering through those shutters in that half-darkened room, I was so interested in the mass effect you got with the men’s thick shoulders and blocked in shapes. . . is it possible that in the earlier version the shots showing the dead woman on the floor were for some reason deleted?” (147-8). This suggests that H.D. saw a version with the murder plot intact; she just did not see the body of the dead woman on the floor in that particular scene because she was so entranced by the light and blocking of the scene. H.D.’s point, as she gives Pabst the last word in “An Appreciation,” is that there are no dead bodies in his films. It is the real living bodies that we are meant to see: “‘Ah,’ interrupted Mr. Pabst delightedly, ‘I did not *mean* you to see the body of the murdered woman on the floor’” (148). Accordingly, the female bodies spotlighted by Pabst—listening bodies, nursing bodies, sexually functional bodies, as I have described above—are most importantly, *living* bodies. The shots of them and the continuity editing that emphasizes movement convey life and survival.



Pabst and Dreyer both focus on women's bodies in their films. However, whereas Pabst focuses on living women, H.D. found Dreyer's technique problematic in that it focused on the abuse and demise of one woman, and not just any woman, but a feminist icon in H.D.'s eyes: Joan of Arc. Dreyer's film is known for its excessive use of close-ups to hone in on what he saw as Joan's essential experience. The real Joan of Arc's "examination lasted five months," explained Dreyer in a contemporaneous interview, "but I have put only the essential and truly representative material in it. If you will, I have set Joan of Arc's fate in a kind of bird's-eye view, where all the unnecessary elements disappear" (qtd. in Drum 126-7). The result is what Siegfried Kracauer has called "an exploration of the human face in documentary fashion" (Kracauer 79). But as Kracauer continues, "The cinematic quality of physiognomic documentary itself is bought at a price. . . . *Joan of Arc* evades the difficulties bound up with historical films only because it neglects history—a neglect sustained by the photographic beauty of its close-ups. It unfolds in a no-man's land which is neither the past nor the present" (79-80). The close-up offers no context, no history. It, instead, offers in blown-up detail Joan's suffering body.

The crux of the film is the sequence made up of two cross-cut scenes: one takes place indoors and consists of shots of Joan's haircut; the other takes place outside and is a montage of various anonymous circus performers. This six-minute sequence occurs at the film's climax between Joan's forced confession and her subsequent recantation.<sup>112</sup> The sequence begins with a shot of a floor with hair falling in a pile next to the legs of a stool and a booted foot. We already know by this point that it must be Joan who is subjected to

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<sup>112</sup> Minutes 55-61 of the 83-minute film.

this shearing. The camera cuts to an extreme close-up of Joan's face from her nose up to the top of her head. Tears stream down her cheeks as her hair is cut by the guard's scissors.

The haircutting scene is notorious in film history as an illustration of Dreyer's commitment to realism at the expense of his actors' vanity. Famously, Marie Falconetti's real hair was actually cut. In an interview published around the time of the film's release, Falconetti describes the circumstances around the scene:

When I signed the contract, Dreyer appealed to me as an artist, and asked me to cut my hair off. He did not make it a condition. I understood him and gave into his wish. As the time grew nearer, I became more and more doubtful, and the last two nights before, I couldn't sleep. On the day itself I received large bouquets from all my friends and the film personnel, and that just made it worse. But still it had to be. Everyone was sent away, and I sat down in my chair. I felt as if I had been condemned to death. I felt as if I were about to be executed. I didn't need to play that scene; I could just be myself. For a woman, there's nothing more humiliating than to have her hair cut off" (132).

Dreyer insisted on realism. As André Bazin tells us in *Radio-Cinema*, "Dreyer forbade all makeup. The monks' heads are literally shaved. With the film crew in tears, the executioner actually cut Falconetti's hair before leading her to the stake" (Bazin, "Radio" 20). Rumors flew around the time of *Joan's* release that "Dreyer was a sadist on the set

and that he tortured actors, both physically and mentally, in order to obtain the desired reactions” (Drum and Drum 130). More than just a bad haircut, Falconetti’s famous shearing synecdochally stands for the brutalization of women’s bodies that H.D. protests.<sup>113</sup>

It is significant that the haircut scene is cross-cut in this sequence with an odd montage of circus performers, which upon first viewing appear to be totally out of place in a film that follows so closely the historical trial, and focuses so narrowly on Joan and her prosecutors. In a film made overwhelmingly of close-ups, why widen the shot to include these outsiders? Circus performers are portrayed as misfits who fall outside of the center of society. This is the case in terms of their presence in the film as well, which is surprising precisely because the society of the film, up until this moment, is entirely made up of those involved in Joan’s trial. The circus performers provide a link to the wider world, and there is a symbolic connection between them and Joan.

The montage begins with a shot of two men carrying a large tray with unidentifiable pots and vessels on top of it through a crowded marketplace. In the background an acrobat swings on a high swing, echoing the back-and-forth of Joan’s interrogation. After each close-up of Joan’s haircut, the camera cuts to the marketplace and pans to a series of individual performers: a man prodding a poodle to stand on its hindquarters; an acrobat balancing on one leg; a contortionist standing on one leg with the other leg wrapped around his neck; a knife-swallower; another contortionist who wraps his left arm around the back of his neck to his right shoulder and underneath his

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<sup>113</sup> I think H.D. reads Dreyer against his intention. He demanded realism to shine a light on the brutal treatment of a female hero, not necessarily to condone it. In other words, his intention was to portray Joan as a powerful female hero.

right armpit; and a man balancing a wheel on his head. The tray that the two men carry in this opening shot of the montage recalls the stretcher upon which Joan was carried outside in the preceding sequence of Joan's haranguing in the graveyard, and the poodle being prodded with a stick recalls Joan's earlier subjection to humiliation and ridicule by the prison guards who prop her up with a straw crown on her head. The contortionists, too, connect back to Joan's torture scene where her arms are twisted (see fig. 2). In fact, the overall effect of the presence of these seemingly out-of-place performers points us back to the montage torture-chamber sequence at the center of the film.

In other words, on one level, the performers stand for Joan's cruel treatment during her trial and the inhuman methods used by the prosecutors to get Joan to confess. But on another level, the circus performers' connection to Joan suggests her status within society and the way that the heretic is brought to the center of town and made into a spectacle. Joan, as a chosen disciple of God and as a female warrior, falls way outside the norm. Like these circus performers, she is a misfit and a threat to the establishment and the patriarchal authority. The presence of the circus performers signals not only Joan's torture and interrogation but also her future. The abnormal status of the performers is what brings them to the center of the marketplace to be looked at. So, too, Joan will be brought to the center of the marketplace to be burned at the stake, her execution paralleling the public spectacle of the circus performers who perform their "otherness" for those within the circle of society. Ultimately, the juxtaposition of these two scenes shows the relationship between the one and the many. The abuse depicted does not happen to only one woman; she stands for many.

H.D.'s assessment of Dreyer's *Joan* is exemplary of her developing oppositional political stance. In "Joan of Arc," her 1927 essay on the film, H.D. takes issue with Dreyer's brutal technique, which she likens to the torturous interrogation methods of the orthodox theologians within the film. While she grants that the film is a technical masterpiece, she protests its cruelty:

This great Dane Carl Dreyer takes too damn much for granted. Do I *have* to be cut into slices by this inevitable pan-movement of the camera, these suave lines to left, up, to the right, back, all rhythmical with the remorseless rhythm of a scimitar? Isn't this incomparable Dane Dreyer a very blue-beard, a Turk of an ogre for remorseless cruelty?

H.D. attributes the cruelty of technique to camerawork, or an overabundance of quick panning, which she compares to an Ottoman Turk's slashing and cutting.<sup>114</sup> The film's editing might be the real culprit, however. Dreyer's "scimitar" calls to mind the film's particularly excessive editing. Critics have noted that the film consists of about twice as many shots cut and spliced together as a normal film of the same length—the film consists of a total of 1517 shots and titles, whereas the average film of the same length at the time consisted of between 500 and 1000 shots.<sup>115</sup> This style of fast editing is comparable to Sergei Eisenstein's famous masterpiece of montage, *Battleship Potemkin*,

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<sup>114</sup> The reference to the "Turk" precedes Joan's historical timeframe, coming as it were from the earlier period of the Crusades; yet the word scimitar, according to the OED, first appears etymologically in Joan's era, fifteenth-century France. H.D.'s metaphor then suggests that Joan's crusade against the orthodox theologians parallels the crusaders' relationship to the Ottoman Turks of preceding centuries, both of which take their place along the historical continuum beginning with Christ. Christ figures, especially female Christ figures, are recurring in H.D.'s work, especially in her contemporaneous *Pilate's Wife* and in her last long poem, *Hermetic Definition*, which we will see in chapter 4.

<sup>115</sup> In his commentary on the Criterion Collection DVD of *Joan*, Casper Tybjerg gives us these specifics.

which consists of around 2000 shots.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, the majority of shots in *Joan* are close-ups. The difficulty of the film for H.D., for all viewers, has as much to do with the sheer number of close-ups in the film as it does with number of cuts that work upon the audience as the judges in the film work upon Joan.

In addition to the camerawork, “every conceivable method of dramatic and scenic technique,” the *mise-en-scène*, the acting, and blocking, for example, “are all calculated to drive in the pitiable truth like the very nails of the spread hands of the Christ” (132). As the long paragraph continues in a stream-of-consciousness raving that echoes the haranguing it describes, H.D. finally suggests that Dreyer’s use of incessant close-ups create an oppressive and claustrophobic effect for the spectator:

Do we need the Christ-nails driven in and pulled out and driven in and drawn out, while Jeanne already numb and dead gazes dead and numb at her accuser and fumbles in her dazed hypnotized manner towards some solution of the claustrophobia? I am shut in here, I want to get out. I want to get out. And instead of seeing in our mind the very ambrosial fields toward which that stricken soul is treading, foot by foot like the very agony toward skull-hill, we are left pinned like some senseless animal, impaled as she is impaled by agony. (132)

H.D.’s choice of language is striking. She utilizes not only crucifixion imagery—“Christ-nails,” which is consistent with Joan’s Christ-like iconography in the film—but also verbs like “driven in,” “pulled out,” and “drawn out” that sexualize the assault and

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<sup>116</sup> Also noted in Tybjerg’s commentary.

emphasize the androgynous Joan's feminization by her accusers.<sup>117</sup> Joan is utterly violated and brutalized, and so is the spectator. *Joan* leaves H.D. "shut in" and "pinned down" just as Joan is worn down and drained of life as the film progresses. Both Joan and H.D. are "impaled," again a probing image of bodily violation. Both are dehumanized by the masterful technique.

In the eugenic period, these misfits, who fall outside the norm, represent a large population of people—and recall Mottier's list of social misfits—who become increasingly vulnerable, especially with the rise of National Socialism. And this is what H.D. implicitly objected to in her reading of the film. The brutalization of the body—Joan's haircut, her twisted limbs, her bleeding, and the mirror images of the contorted misfits performing their otherness for the spectator—alarmed H.D. And more than that, it forced her to assume the negative position of the suffering heretic.<sup>118</sup> By contrast, H.D. admired Pabst for allowing his female characters to come across as full human beings: "G. W. Pabst," H.D. insists, "is almost a magician, his people are created, not made[.] There is, indeed 'another side' to every one of his women. . . every one is shown as a 'being', a creature of consummate life and power and vitality. G. W. Pabst brings out the vital and vivid forces in women as the sun in flowers" (145). Where H.D. faulted Dreyer's technique for brutalizing Joan on screen, she praised Pabst for bringing his female characters to life.

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<sup>117</sup> See my next chapter for more on H.D.'s interest in an androgynous Christ that parallels Dreyer's Joan.

<sup>118</sup> The OED indicates that the word *heretic* comes to us by way of medieval French from the Greek for "to be able to choose." Joan, as a heretic, is one who chooses what to believe rather than accept the beliefs bestowed upon her by the religious orthodoxy. She chooses not to conform even though her choice results in her death. H.D. implicitly critiques a culture that does not allow choice: If women do not have the right to vote, if women have no legal right to make reproductive choices, then women are subject to brutalization, torture, and death.

In holding up Dreyer and Pabst against each other, in comparing their “techniques” and the effects of those techniques, H.D. was engaging not only in film critique but in a larger feminist social critique. In her film writing, H.D. used the close-up as a metaphor to scrutinize film and protests women’s negative social position that make their brutalization commonplace. H.D. turned the technique around in order to make a feminist cultural critique. While she could not write directly about her own illegal abortion, or the social, historical, and personal circumstances surrounding it, H.D. insisted on writing about films that spotlighted women’s brutalized bodies.

## V. Conclusion

In recent years, critics have moved toward reading H.D.’s later poetry as increasingly political.<sup>119</sup> I see H.D.’s *Close Up* writing as a clear turning point toward the political, which paves the way for her later feminist poetry. Writing essays about film allows H.D. to interrogate cultural forces without revealing how personal the stakes.<sup>120</sup> H.D.’s *Close Up* essays allow her to make feminist socio-cultural critiques that her previous poetry and prose did not allow her to make. In writing about film form, H.D. can engage in larger feminist debates: by pointing to film techniques like editing and close-ups that should be neutral but can be used to act violently upon the spectator, H.D.

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<sup>119</sup> See especially Morris.

<sup>120</sup> The essay form itself lends itself to H.D.’s increasingly political task. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes in “*f*-Words: An Essay on the Essay”: “Writing an essay comes from curiosity and need—the need to examine opinions and contradictions and to interrogate cultural materials, especially those taken for granted” (27). The essay as a form might be said to destabilize the orthodoxy of the mainstream. DuPlessis goes on to characterize the essay’s ethos as one of “intense examination. But it’s an examination that is endless; the materials and possibilities outrun any finality. This endlessness should guarantee the antiauthoritarian play of perpetual dialectics” (27).



suggests that film has the responsibility to promote social equality, sexual freedom, and peace.

Surrounding H.D.'s feminist critique in *Close Up* are writings by her partners, Bryher and Macpherson, which use the metaphor of medical abortion to describe and protest film censorship. The use of this metaphor shows how complicated the issue was for Bryher and Macpherson, who were both key players in H.D.'s abortion, especially in terms of the pressure they put on H.D. to terminate the pregnancy. Under Macpherson's editorship, *Close Up* becomes a forum of political debate, and in its review of films about abortion, *Close Up* engages in a discussion of feminist social issues—particularly in terms of women's reproductive freedom, which as we have seen was in crisis in the eugenic period. Both popular and medical films show the extent to which debates about reproductive control are played out on individual women's bodies, and Bryher directly writes about such issues. Macpherson and Bryher demand that filmmakers be given "reproductive control" free from the censors' "mutilating" operations. They demand that the filmmaker's vision be respected, that the filmmaker see and control what happens to his/her "body," the film. They demand that such artistic vision be allowed to teach and instruct in the cases of both art and medical film. Just as the close-up, from which their journal gets its name, is the modern optic that serves to both scrutinize and convey knowledge, film can edify the public. Censorship, however, serves to obscure vision and knowledge.

While H.D. never explicitly writes about her abortion, her film writing provides its own close-up on the technical aspects of film that make it art and that make art

political, especially in terms of its treatment of women and women's bodies. The irony is that while her *Close Up* writing becomes increasingly political and openly feminist, H.D. engages in self-censorship with regards to her own bodily experience. And the personal and socio-historical circumstances surrounding that abortion reveal the lack of control she had over her own reproductive choice. The collision of film form and feminist rights in H.D.'s *Close Up* writing signals the crisis of reproductive freedom pervasive in modernist art and literature. And for H.D., the political is personal

## CHAPTER 4

### **Blood and Milk: H.D.'s Moravian Heritage and the Return to the Maternal Body in "Hermetic Definition"**

H.D.'s last poem, the three-part "Hermetic Definition," was written as she was nearing her seventy-fifth year and living at a convalescent clinic in Switzerland.<sup>121</sup>

H.D.'s own aging body was not fully functional, due to a previously broken hip that left her unable to walk without great difficulty. In contrast to the poet's actual physical condition, her last poem is a brazen personal epic centered on the fully functioning physiological body, a final turn away from the seemingly impersonal reticence of her earlier poetry. The opening poem of "Hermetic Definition" marvels at the surprise of a thriving sexual desire late in life:

Why did you come

to trouble my decline?

I am old (I was old till you came);

the reddest rose unfolds. . . . (3)

The semicolon ending the first stanza marks a punctual pause in, and then a continuation of, the sentence and sentiment, opening into the poem's symbolically sexual refrain, "the reddest rose unfolds." Biographically, this poem was sparked by H.D.'s meeting of the

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<sup>121</sup> The long poem to which I am referring, "Hermetic Definition," consists of three titled parts, "Part One: Red Rose and a Beggar," "Part Two: Grove of Academe" and "Part Three: Star of Day," and is the first poem of three long poems in the volume, *Hermetic Definition*. It is followed by "Sagesse," which is dated "summer-winter 1957," and "Winter Love," which is dated "January 3- April 15, 1959." Although most of my reading in this chapter focuses on the long poem, "Hermetic Definition," I occasionally treat the volume as a whole, *Hermetic Definition*.

Haitian-born journalist Lionel Durand, a man at least thirty years her junior, whom she met only briefly when he came to interview her at the clinic after the publication of *Bid Me to Live*, and then again a few months later when she traveled to the US to accept the American Academy of Arts and Letters' gold medal of poetry.<sup>122</sup> The speaker calls this lush sexuality roused in her advanced years "ridiculous," "unseemly, impossible, / even slightly scandalous," but boldly goes on to repeat the refrain, "the reddest rose unfolds" (3). Although the poet in her seventies expects a straight "decline," she is surprised by this recharged vivacity. This unstoppable and fecund sexual desire leads almost immediately to a symbolic pregnancy, but not quite as one might expect, as we shall see in this chapter.

Although, as I have argued in my previous chapters, H.D.'s bodily reproductive experiences as a woman in patriarchal society have had a crucial impact on the development of her poetics, her earlier writing dealt with these bodily experiences in indirect ways. Conversely, in "Hermetic Definition," when H.D. is nearing the end of her own life, she returns to the reproductively functional female body directly and with purpose. The metaphor and formal enactment of pregnancy that emerges in "Hermetic Definition" is key to H.D.'s culminating poetic and political mission to rethink the maternal as a means to heal a world culture devastated by war. In her final poem, H.D. draws not only on her own complicated reproductive past but also on her strengthening interest in Moravian theology in order to refigure women's functional capacity for birth

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<sup>122</sup> In "Part Two: Grove of Academe," lyric fourteen, the speaker, transparently H.D., refers to her age and the age of Durand: "he was not quite 40, / I was over 70, so I read you again" (39). Norman Holmes Pearson also refers to the meetings in his foreword to *Hermetic Definition*. A brush with 1960 Nobel Laureate Saint-John Perse at the awards ceremony results in H.D.'s conflation of Durand and Perse as the archetypal Eternal Lover. "Grove of Academe," takes up Perse as the imaginary lover. More on this below.

as a regenerative, world-changing force. Moravian theology not only celebrates the body but also equalizes each component—human, divine and spiritual—of the Holy Trinity by valuing the physiological functioning of mothers. In Moravian thought, maternal physiology, including the capacity for gestation, birth and lactation, are not simply in the service of creating and nurturing a sovereign son; they are the active center of a dynamic relational subjectivity that is the blueprint for a new kind of ethical conception of personhood, similar to Julia Kristeva’s “herethics” and Mielle Chandler’s mothering as an in-process subjectivity.<sup>123</sup> “Hermetic Definition” creates a space through which to think such “heretical” subjectivities. Using a pregnancy metaphor based on her understanding of Moravian theology, H.D. creates a poetic space that enacts the birth of the mother-poet figure and celebrates taboo aspects of female sexuality previously only implied in H.D.’s poetry.

This chapter, then, builds on the work of H.D. scholars such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Jane Augustine, Adalaide Morris, and Susan Stanford Friedman, who have looked at H.D.’s visionary “mythic gyno-poetics” and have revealed H.D. as a feminist-activist poet.<sup>124</sup> Like DuPlessis in *H.D. The Career of that Struggle*, I argue that, at the end of her writing life, H.D. takes pregnancy, birth, and lactation as transformative sexual and spiritual events, which she can reintegrate into her poetics both through symbolic content and form, and thematically through the senses, particularly through sound.

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<sup>123</sup> Kristeva coins the term “herethics” by combining the words heretical and ethical and defines it as an ethics that is “separated from morality,” and that “makes the thought of death bearable” because it is based upon a theory of maternal connectedness and the process of reproducing, birthing and mothering a child (262-63). More on this below.

<sup>124</sup> The term “mythic gyno-poetics” originally comes from Friedman’s *Penelope’s Web* (352), but Jane Augustine borrows it for her work on *The Gift*. Morris, for example, argues that the “poetry [H.D.] wrote in the midst of the World War II bombing of London turns the energies of a/orality from escapism to the intellectual, cultural, and emotional work of realigning a culture gone awry” (40).

Adding to DuPlessis's classic argument, I show how H.D. specifically draws on her Moravian ancestors' "Blood and Wounds" theology in order to rethink the maternal body and its physiological capacity to give life and heal. By putting DuPlessis in conversation with Moravian historian Katherine Faull, I demonstrate how H.D., rather than reifying traditional fantasies of the maternal, offers an alternate version of the maternal sexual body, one that is based on a Moravian formulation of a fully physiologically functioning poly-gendered Holy Trinity. Before turning to "Hermetic Definition," I'd like to consider more fully the theoretical and theological territories in which H.D.'s late poetry culminates.

## I. Theorizing the Maternal

In "Stabat Mater," Julia Kristeva meditates on motherhood as a problematic state that defies comfortable definition.<sup>125</sup> Although the "mother" is an actual, existing, functional being, patriarchal culture has conflated motherhood with the feminine and elevated both to a "*fantasy* that is nurtured by the adult, man or woman" (234). This cultural fantasy, Kristeva suggests, is not of an idealized mother as much as it is an "idealization of the *relationship* that binds her to us," which she calls an idealization of

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<sup>125</sup> "Stabat Mater" is one of Kristeva's early essays on the importance of the maternal and the maternal body in subject formation. She points out that Freud has little to say about the mother in his development of psychoanalysis, but that lack is a "vast dark continent" that demands theorizing (254-56). Whereas Freud theorizes that castration anxiety—a fear of paternal violence—is the impetus for subject formation, Kristeva argues for the importance of the pre-Oedipal maternal relationship between mother and child that calls the child into humanity. Here and in her later work (see especially *Black Sun* and *New Maladies of the Soul*) she calls for a deeper understanding of the maternal and the mother-child relationship, without which women will continue to be degraded in patriarchal culture. See, too, her work on the abject as related to the feminine and the maternal.

“primary narcissism” that has been misused in patriarchal culture so that the actual experience of mothering is overshadowed by the fantasy (234). She rightly points to the resulting “negation or rejection of motherhood by some avant-garde feminist groups. Or else an acceptance—conscious or not—of its traditional representation by the great mass of people, women and men” (234). Although “Stabat Mater” dates from 1976, the maternal has yet to be adequately theorized. The vast majority of feminist thinkers still have a tough time claiming or philosophically embracing the maternal due to the problems Kristeva has outlined in “Stabat Mater.”<sup>126</sup> Further work on maternal theory and feminist ethics is being produced by a new generation of feminist philosophers, such as Mielle Chandler.

In “Emancipated Subjectivities and the Subjugation of Mothering Practices,” Chandler questions traditional philosophical delineations of subjectivities, asserting that the “predominant and privileged” “conception of persons as separate autonomous beings” has been a philosophical prejudice for far too long (272). This prejudice necessarily precludes mothers, who carry, birth, and care for infants and children, from being considered full subjects, because the burden of motherhood negates autonomy.<sup>127</sup> Following Judith Butler’s recasting of “gender as ‘a kind of becoming or activity,’” Chandler offers another conception of subjectivity that is inclusive of mothering in that it

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<sup>126</sup> There is but a small but growing field within women’s studies focused on maternal theory and feminist philosophy, spearheaded by the Canadian feminist scholar Andrea O’Reilly. See, for example, Abbey and O’Reilly.

<sup>127</sup> Chandler is clear that “autonomy” is a concept to be scrutinized and re-evaluated. “In political liberal theory autonomy designates, firstly, a unitary independence, and, secondly, a self-government that precludes external restraints. The notion of autonomy is intimately linked to notions of freedom and liberty, the basic liberties (movement, speech, and so on) being based in a deontological notion of the self as autonomous” (279-80). She agrees that motherhood, especially for “nonaffluent mothers,” can be “extremely restrictive.” But her point is that there is an ethical mistake “not so much in equating motherhood with a loss of freedom and autonomy, but rather in adopting autonomy as the ideal” (280).

rejects autonomy as the basis upon which subjectivity stands (273). “Mother,” Chandler posits, like one’s gender, “is best understood as a verb, as something someone does, a practice which creates one’s identity as intertwined, interconnected, and in-relation,” and a maternal subjectivity is continually enacted as such (273). Like Kristeva, who uses the concept of the pregnant maternal body, where two beings are contained in one and where one being is always becoming, Chandler argues for a subjectivity in-process. Rather than a monolithic identity, “mother” would be a dynamic action entailing various activities including those relating to other subjects.<sup>128</sup> For Chandler, the selves that are produced by and through mothering are valuable.<sup>129</sup>

In theorizing the maternal, both Kristeva and Chandler consider a pre-Oedipal space of human-connectedness and becoming as crucial to subject formation. Both endeavor to imbue the maternal with real, dynamic subjectivity that cannot be reduced to the fantasy offered by Christianity or simple nature offered by science. For Chandler, it is not just the offspring becoming a person through the mother’s conception, gestation, nurturing, and care of the child, but the mother’s own subjective becoming in living in relation to another being. And for Kristeva, too, the notion of the pregnant body is a

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<sup>128</sup> Chandler points to the problems of identity: “Identity is a dangerous game not only because, as Foucault explains it, the government of individuation ties one to a specific identity in a prescriptive way, or, as Butler puts it, one faces being recolonized by the very sign that holds the promise of liberation. . .” (281). One tactic is to refuse to participate in such governmentally prescribed identities, but to refuse to mother “is too much to ask of any mother,” and would not only have “real consequences for the lives of children” and society in general, “but would also be a refusal of the kind of self a mothering self becomes through mothering” (282). The loss would be too great. Instead, she proposes the “refusal to conform to emancipatory subjectivities that subjugate mothering practices” (283-84).

<sup>129</sup> Both Kristeva and Chandler suggest that one does not necessarily need to be a woman to mother. Recent cases of pregnant men such as transman Thomas Beatty suggest one does not necessarily need to be a woman to gestate and birth a baby either. Beatty, as a transman, has given birth to three children since 2008.



metaphor for all subjects who are always in the process of becoming.<sup>130</sup> Both Kristeva and Chandler theorize the maternal in order to reconcile feminism and mothering. This is the space in which I wish to consider H.D.'s return to the maternal body in *Hermetic Definition*. Instead of accepting the parthenogenic fantasy, she replaces it with a fully functioning maternal body, a body that is driven by sexual desire, a body that gestates, births, and lactates. Like her Moravian ancestors, H.D. celebrates a physiologically functioning maternal body that is also the center of spiritual and cultural healing. Like Kristeva, and unlike Freud, H.D. turns to a pre-Oedipal basis for identity formation.

Although she does not explicitly claim a feminist-maternalist stance, I argue that “Hermetic Definition” moves toward such a reconciliation in order to critique patriarchal culture. Following Adelaide Morris’s argument that H.D.’s poetics increasingly becomes political, I uncover “Hermetic Definition’s” feminist-maternalist foundation, upon which H.D. builds in order to heal a world brutalized by two world wars.<sup>131</sup> I place my reading in the context of the major works H.D. produced during and after World War II, including her epic poems, *Trilogy* and *Helen in Egypt*,<sup>2</sup> and her Moravian prose, *The Gift* and *The Mystery*, which incorporated H.D.’s research into her Moravian past, suggesting that the entire volume, *Hermetic Definition*, is an important part of this group of H.D.’s post-World War II writing.<sup>132</sup> *Hermetic Definition*, more than any other of her late works, especially the titular long poem, returns H.D. to the maternal body, but she only arrives

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<sup>130</sup> “Although it concerns every woman’s body, the heterogeneity that cannot be subsumed in the signifier nevertheless explodes violently with pregnancy (the threshold of culture and nature and the child’s arrival) which extracts woman out of her oneness and gives her the possibility—but not the certainty—of reaching out to the other, the ethical” (Kristeva 259-60).

<sup>131</sup> See Morris.

<sup>132</sup> I don’t go into any detailed analysis of these other works; however, I offer their critical reception as backdrop to my readings of “Hermetic Definition.”

there after her prolific writing period of the World War II era, when she delves deeply into her Moravian past. The Moravian influence, in other words, was crucial to the way H.D. ultimately theorized the maternal in her last poem.<sup>133</sup> It is through her connection to her radical Christian ancestors, whose body-embracing spirituality was heavily based on the corporeality of Christ, that H.D. is able to return to the body, specifically the maternal-sexual body, in “Hermetic Definition.” Following Moravian theology, which makes space for both male and female corporeality and sexuality within its beliefs and practices, H.D. is finally able to contend with the maternal body, and what’s more make it explicitly central to her poetics. Predating Kristeva’s “Stabat Mater” by almost two decades, H.D. endeavors to think through the maternal as a way to critique a patriarchal culture that produced two world wars. Where Kristeva analyzes Christian representations of the Virgin Mother to reveal the impossible fantasy that traps women and defines them as abject in patriarchal culture, H.D. offers a revised mother figure, a physiologically functioning mother legitimated through radical Moravian theology. H.D.’s late maternal poetics provide a rich ground on which to develop new theories of the maternal for the twenty-first century.

## II. Maternal Sexuality and Moravian Spirituality

Moravian Christian theology focuses on women’s bodies and places reproductive functions in a central religious role. H.D.’s research into her Moravian heritage drew her

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<sup>133</sup> Freud first suggested a need for H.D. to return to the maternal during her analysis in the early 1930s. H.D. recounts this imperative in *Tribute to Freud*, which was compiled in the 1940s using notes she had taken during analysis a decade before. Dianne Chisholme argues that H.D. translates and feminizes central tenets of Freudian psychoanalysis in *Tribute to Freud*, revising some of his misogynistic formulations to make room for women as full human beings.

to reading about the bodily dimensions of her ancestors' belief and practices of the 1740s and 1750s, which were more extreme than her own late nineteenth-century Moravian culture.<sup>134</sup> In "Christ's Other Self," Moravian historian Katherine Faull explains the complex body-centered theology of H.D.'s ancestors, the Moravians who first settled in Pennsylvania in the eighteenth century. The Moravian leader Count Zinzendorf, whom H.D. researched and studied thoroughly in the 1940s, outlined a new theology in "opposition to the sterile rationalism of the early Enlightenment and the impersonal orthodoxy of the state church" (31). This oppositional theology encompassed both male and female embodiment, incorporating and equalizing both in the construction of Christ, Mary and the Holy Spirit. Faull shows that "Zinzendorf posits a notion of identity of the religious subject that is neither static nor in a state of flux. It is not just a binary other defined always by the primacy of the male self" (31). Rather than looking at a strictly male or strictly female Christ figure, Faull concludes, "The Moravians of the eighteenth century were not looking at a female Christ; they were contemplating an embodied God whose polyvalent signification of male and female sexualities allows believers, both men

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<sup>134</sup> The late Moravian historian Henry Williams notes that it is important to differentiate between the Moravian culture of H.D.'s childhood and the theology and culture of her Moravian ancestors: "It is important, I think, that when one looks at the Moravian influence on H.D.'s childhood one looks at the Moravian Church as it was then in Bethlehem, its services and customs, its hymnals and liturgies then in use, and the sense of history of the community, as well as at the family, and at how the family and the community were intertwined. This specific situation should not be confused with eighteenth-century Bethlehem, or the hymns of the Sifting Period, or the strong Zinzendorffian influence which was considerably muted in nineteenth-century Bethlehem" (7). However, evidence in the H.D. archive at Yale shows that H.D. was influenced by the eighteenth-century Moravian practices of the Zinzendorffian period, which she researched in the 1940s. For example, Yale holds H.D.'s copies of eighteenth-century Moravian texts, which she read, annotated, and underlined. These include Moravian church materials such as hymnbooks as well as anti-Moravian treatises from the 1750s by Henry Rimius and Andrew Frey, which detail Moravian theology and practices in order to condemn them.

and women, to become both fully human and divine” (39).<sup>135</sup> In this construction alone, one can see the strong influence on H.D.’s late thoughts on gender and spirituality. Zinzendorf “turns contemporary gender stereotypes on their heads” (38). And H.D. was perhaps most attracted to the radical gender-bending that got the Moravians into trouble with the established Orthodox Church.

In her introduction to *The Gift*, Jane Augustine describes H.D.’s research into her Moravian past and explains H.D.’s fascination with the “Blood and Wounds” theology of the “Sifting Period” (1740s-1750s), when Moravian doctrine was being figured out by Zinzendorf and the church elders. Augustine tells us, “The Sifting Time was a period of religious enthusiasm and fanaticism, which overtook the Moravians in the German congregations in particular through a kind of fundamentalist literalism regarding the ‘Blood and Wounds’ theology. J. E. Hutton in his [A] *History of Moravian Church*, which H.D. read, quotes Zinzendorf’s declaration on this theme: ‘We stick to the Blood and Wounds Theology. We will preach nothing but Jesus the Crucified. We will look for nothing else in the Bible but the Lamb and his Wounds, and again Wounds, and Blood and Blood. . . We shall stay forever in the little side-hole, where we are so unspeakably blessed’” (H.D., *The Gift* 20). Augustine describes some of the extreme practices of this period, about which H.D. read. For example, one particularly extravagant episode

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<sup>135</sup> Faull takes issue with Aaron Fogleman’s recent work on Moravian theology, namely his book *Jesus is Female* (which Augustine draws upon), because of his “sensationalist” approach where he argues that Moravians thought of Jesus as simply female (29). She instead builds on the feminist theological scholarship of Christine Battersby, Grace Janzen, and especially Gavin D’Costa (30). Quoting D’Costa, she notes that “‘the body of Christ as the church is neither male nor female, but both. Jesus’s gender can’t be fixed since it finds shape in ‘his’ body, the Marian church, which is constituted by men and women in very different roles’. D’Costa includes in his examination of the shifting signification of sex in the Trinity the trope of Jesus’s womb” (31).

occurred during one of Zinzendorf's many absences from the original Moravian settlement in Herrnhut, Germany, when he left the Moravian community in the hands of his teenage son Christian Renatus, who threw extravagant orgy-like parties celebrating various birthdays and feast days. Giant reproductions "of Jesus's side-wound were constructed" for these parties, "painted red and illuminated by candlelight from behind, large enough for a person to crawl into, and devout persons did so, as an act of piety" (21). These kinds of celebrations made their way to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in the 1740s and 1750s as well, and they came part and parcel with radical ideas about gender.

Faull elaborates on how precisely the "Blood and Wounds" theology made space for female embodiment and sexuality within the Moravian religion. Christ's wounds and blood, according to Moravian thought during the Sifting Period, do not signify death or torture, but instead signify life because of their symbolic association with women and female sexuality. Zinzendorf with other church leaders wrote the 17<sup>th</sup> *Homily on the Litany of Christ's Wounds*, for example, which was sung weekly at Moravian services as a celebration and adoration of Christ's suffering and sacrifice (31).<sup>136</sup> The strikingly vivid bodily imagery "that praise[s] the shape, color, and feel of the wound ha[s] lead critics for two centuries to draw parallels between the wound and the vulva," which in turn has made the composition controversial. Faull quotes this extraordinary document at length:

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<sup>136</sup> H.D. would have been familiar with this text as it was regularly referred to in Rimius and Frey, which H.D. read and enjoyed due to their detailed (if negative) accounts of Moravian life and religion. According to Fogleman, these diatribes often took issue with the centrality of female sexuality in Moravian theology. In "Christ's Other Self," Faull summarizes and agrees with Fogleman's assessment that "the many attacks on the Moravian Church in the eighteenth century were occasioned by the radical shifts in both theology and the praxis of gender and sex within the Moravian communities" (38). She however argues, counter to Fogleman, that "these objections were not to the figure of the female Christ, . . . but to a very liberating view of Christian life. The contemplation of the wounds and the sexuality of Jesus evoked in both male and female believers a love of self and a recognition of the generative power of the fleshiness of God become human" (38).

Strengthening Wounds of Jesus! / So wet, so bloody, bleed on my heart  
and make me brave and wound-like.

Vanished Wounds of Jesus! / When I have bedded down my soul in there  
and dined, then close again.

Hollow wounds of Jesus! / In your refuge sit comfortably many kinds of  
sinners!

Purple wounds of Jesus! / Ye are so juicy, whoe'er comes near you, gets  
Moisture spicy, and's fill'd with Blood!

Juicy wounds of Jesus! / Who sharpens his spear and slits you slightly, he  
tastes you!

Warm Wounds of Jesus! / In no feather bed can a child feel so safe from  
the cold air.

Sweet Wounds of Jesus! / So mild, so tender, into you happily chuse to  
enter all simple babes.

Soft wound of Jesus! / I do love to lie easy and cheerful, and soft, what do  
I? I creep to thee.

Hot wounds of Jesus! / Continue to heat until the whole world sweat to  
death in your glow! (qtd. in Faull 32-33)

According to Faull, both the “physical markings of sex” and the “wounds of Jesus in the litany are multivalent. . . The wounds are described as ripped, deep, bloody, foaming, sparkling, clear, wet, juicy, warm, hot, soft, little, delicate, dear. The function of the wounds is not merely to suggest female sexuality, to represent to the worshipper the location of the self-referential feminine. Rather it is about the production of the other self, mentioned in the 17<sup>th</sup> *Homily*: it is about the awareness of being in terms of the ‘other self,’ Christ’s other self, a self that is feminine. Why feminine? Because of the recognition of suffering” (33). Faull goes on to argue that Jesus’s wounds have these feminine qualities not because Jesus is inherently female, but because of a conflation of Christ with his mother, Mary. “In other words, those maternal, generative suffering aspects of Christ in the *Litany of the Wounds* and in the hymns of the 1740s are in fact Marian signifiers that have been shifted from the mother to the body of the son” (34).

Augustine explains how these dramatic gender-bending aspects of Moravian theology appealed to H.D.: “Before the suppression [of these kinds of celebrations], however, the symbolic view of the Holy Spirit as a comforting mother was introduced into Bethlehem by the young bishop John Cammerhof, who imported from Europe an exuberant and good-hearted version of the ‘Herrnhaag extravagances’. As H.D. researched these, she saw their damaging and foolish aspects, but overall she was attracted to the errant Moravians’ ‘enthusiasm’ and celebratory attitudes,” which she saw as signifying “mystical insight and an entrée to the unconscious, the shared inspired condition that, to H.D.’s distress, disappeared from later Moravianism. She saw joy and celebration of the union of human beings—sexual, social, and religious—as part of the ‘Plan’ that she wished to see renewed and carried out in the modern world” (21). It is

here that eighteenth-century Moravian theology lines up with late twentieth/early twenty-first-century feminist-maternalist philosophy as posited by Kristeva and Chandler. Faull argues that Zinzendorf's model of the human subject as being Christ's other self provides us with an alternative symbolic system in which we *are* by *becoming*. In this model we are in constant contact with otherness (Christ), and in order to possess subjectivity we cannot be severed from this other" (31). According to Moravian theology, subjectivity is, as Kristeva and Chandler also describe, (1) in-process or becoming, and (2) in-relation or interconnected. These models of subjectivity are enacted in *Hermetic Definition* in H.D.'s creation of a gestational poetic space.

### III. H.D.'s Late Poetics and the Physiologically Functional Maternal Body

Rachel Blau Duplessis has argued that H.D.'s late epic poems (which, I wish to emphasize, includes *Hermetic Definition*) written in the final stage of her writing career are defined by an authoritative turn to the erotic and especially female sexuality (*Career* 102).<sup>137</sup> The long poems written at the end of her life center not simply on female sexuality but more specifically on its more taboo forms of maternal and post-menopausal

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<sup>137</sup> DuPlessis reads what she calls "matrisexual passion" as central to H.D.'s late poetics in "Winter Love": "H.D. also insisted that heterosexual love is only completed by matrisexual passion--child to mother, mother to child. In that mother-child bond she includes the sororal services of love for both mother and child from another 'mother-child', a wise-woman, clearly based on Bryher. Hence 'Winter Love' uses the experiential turning points of female [sexual] identity (virginity, arousal, seduction, sexual consummation, childbirth, bliss of nursing), but especially focuses upon intervention of a midwife, sage femme, who delivers Helen to motherhood. One may speak of the poems as ecstatic climaxes, two moments of erotic bliss: the climax in sexual honey, and the climax of maternal milk. If Odysseus's presence creates a sexual woman and the plot of romance, the sage femme's assistance creates matrisexuality, and pre-Oedipal erotics" (*Career* 124).



erotics. Duplessis points to an aging H.D. who embraces her sexuality and finds authority in it: H.D. returns to and gathers power from her early erotic experience, including her adolescent relationship with Pound, which she writes about in her memoir, *End to Torment*, in these years, and her World War I-era births. “Winter Love,” which is published within the volume *Hermetic Definition* but written a year before the titular long poem, returns to that same adolescent romance, and was conceived of as a kind of coda to *Helen in Egypt*, according to Pearson in his foreword to the epic. Building on the generative eroticism that of those early encounters, her later works make a connection, according to DuPlessis, between the erotic and the spiritual and signal a “new age in gender relations” (122). DuPlessis suggests that “Eros in *End to Torment*, Esperance in “Winter Love,” and Euphorion in *Helen in Egypt* all create a deliberate continuum between sexuality and spiritual transformation” (122). This continuum is an important thread that runs through all of H.D.’s late work and finally emerges in the form of maternal sexuality in “Hermetic Definition.”<sup>138</sup> The Moravian foundation theme can be fully appreciated with closer attention to this last poem.

H.D. scholars including DuPlessis and Augustine have written about the intertextual relationships among *The Gift*, *Trilogy*, and *Tribute to Freud*, all composed in the 1940s, and have considered these previous works as important stepping stones to H.D.’s epic *Helen in Egypt* (written between 1952 and 1954), which has been read as a feminist and female-centered counterpart to the male modernist epics of Eliot, Pound, and

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<sup>138</sup> H.D.’s last poem, but the first long poem presented alongside “Sagesse” and “Winter Love,” in the *Hermetic Definition* volume. Although I touch on “Winter Love,” the bulk of my analysis is of “Hermetic Definition,” whereas Duplessis focuses on “Sagesse” and “Winter Love,” as they are related to *Trilogy* and *Helen in Egypt*.

Williams.<sup>139</sup> *Hermetic Definition* has received less critical attention but is remarkable for its comparatively unequivocal attention to taboo forms of female sexuality. Three related currents that come directly from H.D.'s earlier interrelated works culminate in "Hermetic Definition," making it significant as a feminist-maternalist poem: (1) H.D.'s psychological need to return to the mother, first made explicit in her analysis with Freud, and documented in letters and *Tribute to Freud*; (2) H.D.'s research into her Moravian heritage, and her attraction to the radical Christian religious beliefs of her ancestors which centered on actual physiologically functional bodies both in every day practice and in symbolic spiritual belief;<sup>140</sup> and finally, (3) H.D.'s poetic mission to heal the world by creating a poetic language that rethinks the imbalanced patriarchal gender structures that have led to two world wars. Critics, as I will briefly recount below, have attended to this last current most thoroughly in *Trilogy* and *Helen in Egypt*. I will show how these three related themes come together in "Hermetic Definition."

*Trilogy* can be read as an important predecessor to *Hermetic Definition*. There are two aspects of the functional female body that are, according to DuPlessis, central to *Trilogy*; namely, pregnancy used as a recurring symbol and pregnancy and birth enacted through a kind of "linguistic hatching." DuPlessis builds on Susan Stanford Friedman and Susan Gubar's pioneering work on *Trilogy*, both of which focus on the poem's "revisionary nature" and "female transformative power" of pregnancy and birth. Gubar especially, she notes, emphasizes H.D.'s "imagistic projections" that symbolize this female power: "sea shells," "worms," "urns," "cartouche" and "butterfly boxes" all

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<sup>139</sup> Also see, for example, Dianne Chisholm's *H.D.'s Freudian Poetics: Psychoanalysis in Translation* and Susan Stanford Friedman's pioneering *Psyche Reborn*. In addition, see Gaveler and Harrison.

<sup>140</sup> This research is the basis for her autobiographical and historical-fictional prose works, *The Gift* and *The Mystery*.

symbolize pregnancy and birth. (89)<sup>141</sup> “Opening” up words act as a “punning metonymic chain of connectors” (91). Words, in this sense, give birth to meaning in new ways. They are regenerative: “To achieve the Isisan rejuvenation, one must look hard at/for the scattered ‘members’ (syllables, associations) and understand the meanings offered by the fragmentation. Finally, such phonemic punning gives access to the language ‘inside’ the language, suggestively occult; suggestively female” (91-92). In *Hermetic Definition*, H.D. refers specifically to this technique and uses it to enact the generative poetic hatching she comes to perfect.

Poem six of “Winter Love,” for example, opens with “The-tis --- Sea-‘tis, I played games like this; / I had long reveries, invoked the future, / re-invoked the past, syllables, mysteries, numbers” (92). The word “Thetis” (Achilles’s mother), *literally* regenerates, giving birth to other words and calling persons into being. The language enacts the birth that leads to the return of Odysseus in the next stanza: “I must have turned a secret key, unwittingly, / when I said Odysseus --- when did I say Odysseus? / how did I call you back, and how did I come back?” (92). The sonic repetition of the regenerating “th,” “s,” and “t” sounds invokes Odysseus and returns the speaker to a youthful love affair. On the sonic level, the progression of the fricative-interdental “th” to the alveolar, “t,” and “s” evokes the sounds of the sea, as one might hear in a seashell, itself symbolically evocative of female sexuality for H.D. It also calls to mind the sonic quality of static, which is significant in terms of “Winter Love” as coda to *Helen in Egypt*, whose hybrid

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<sup>141</sup> See especially sections 30-6 and 37-40 of “Walls Do Not Fall” for “hatching of cryptogram words.”

prose/lyric form came about through H.D.'s sound recordings of the poem.<sup>142</sup> Through the sounds of static the youthful lover emerges, Odysseus is remembered.

More than simply enacting the content of the poem, the sonic quality of H.D.'s late poetry, as Adelaide Morris argues of sound in *Trilogy* in particular, is "a kind of research strategy or material for thought," or, she explains, a hieroglyph (40).

Hieroglyphs work on the sonic level to repeat the consonantal sounds of word roots.<sup>143</sup>

For example, Morris points to a hieroglyph described early in *Trilogy*:

mist and mist-gray, no colour,

still the Luxor bee, chick and hare

pursue unalterable purpose

in green, rose-red, lapis;

they continue to prophesy

from the stone papyrus (H.D., *Trilogy* 3)

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<sup>142</sup> Basing her argument on my "Brief Note on H.D.'s Recording of *Helen in Egypt*," published on PennSound (<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/HD.php>, accessed February 27, 2012), Susan Barbour shows how *Helen in Egypt* is "a reflection of its compositional process both structurally and at the level of its narrative, thereby constituting a unique example of a reflexive modernist text that fuses poetry and prose as well as oral and textual consciousness."

<sup>143</sup> Using the hieroglyph as her "pattern for language," H.D.'s poetry operates on the levels of image, sound and determinative ideogram (41). Morris explains, "In the complex system of ancient Egyptian writing, a hieroglyph can be read as a pictogram, a phonogram, or a determinative. As a pictogram it stands for the object, being, or event represented by the picture: here, a bee, a quail chick, a desert hare. As a phonogram, it represents the consonantal structure of word roots: in this case, bt, w, wn. As a determinative, finally, it indicates which of a number of words with similar structures is intended in a certain context. A winged word in a new and complicated sense, then, the Luxor bee functions as a pictogram for bee, and/or a phonogram for the consonant structure bt; followed by the determinative of a pot, it means *honey*, while followed by the determinative for a god or king, it means *King of Lower Egypt*" (41).

The “phonogram p-r-p-s,” Morris explains, “generates the variants *purpose/prophesy/papyrus*, as if forming a sentence that announces the writer’s intent to use these skeletal frames to give flesh to past, present, and future” (42). Drawing on a contemporaneous letter to Pearson, where H.D. claims that her poetry is “philosophy,” Morris shows how H.D. uses sound in *Trilogy* as a means to “think for or on behalf of her culture” (40-41). Following Morris, I argue that H.D. uses sound in *Hermetic Definition* to create a generative space in which to theorize a culture inclusive of women in general and mothers in particular.

Indeed, the “Circe-magic” of the third stanza, which causes “forgetting,” also has the ability to bring about remembering. The poem ends with the birth of the idea of the phantom Helen who “caused” the Trojan war: This “Helen was conceived under the oleanders, / that is, Helen, the future Helen / that wrecked citadels, was born” (*Hermetic* 92). The “The-tis—Sea-‘tis” (phonograms th-t-s and s-t-s) from the lyric’s opening generates or sonically conceives “that is, Helen” and “citadels” in the last two lines of the lyric. The rest of the final stanza describes the circumstances of the Helen’s actual conception, her birth and the death and destruction that result from her birth. “Conceived under the oleanders” carries the double meaning of a literal sexual conception—Helen, daughter of Leda and Zeus (disguised as a swan), was conceived in a lush floral setting—but also an imaginative conception: the fantasy of Helen as the cause of the war, was thought up in the same “romantic” setting. Oleander, the flower, carries with it both sexual connotations as well as fatal connotations. Oleander extract is a kind of poison used with poison arrows, which connects directly to Achilles’s death by poison arrow to his unprotected heel. Helen and oleander share the phonogram l-n, and the name Helen

repeats three times in two lines, suggesting that there are more than one, past, present, and future: the Helen who “was conceived,” the Helen “that is,” and the “future” Helen. Thus, H.D.’s method imbues words and syllables with multiple meanings that evoke and invoke both birth and death, both romantic love and violence. This mythic-syllabic punning of H.D.’s late poetry enacts a kind of cultural critique. Although the poem ends with the traditional Helen of Troy being conceived under the oleanders, readers of H.D. know well by now that there is another Helen, the conceit upon which *Helen in Egypt* is based. Thus, while the poem begins with the mother, “The-tis,” it ends with the birth of Helen, who in the traditional telling of it, brings about Achilles’s death. Birth and death are enclosed together in the same gestational space of the poem. Yet it is through this space that H.D. seeks to problematize our traditional understanding of Helen, herself, as the cause of the war. As in *Helen in Egypt*, there is more than one Helen.

H.D.’s late poetic mode seeks to rethink traditional fantasies of the feminine in patriarchal culture. In offering this other Helen, H.D. urges readers to consider real, fully functioning women in the place of impossible fantasy. In “Stabat Mater,” Kristeva similarly calls for us to theorize a maternal space based on real women rather than on an apocryphal mistranslation: Kristeva tells us that the story of Mary’s purity, or the immaculate conception, originally appeared in the apocrypha and was not initially accepted by the Church, although it was tolerated, she explains, especially by the eastern orthodox church. Gradually it became a central fact to the extent that some even argued for Mary’s perpetual virginity; that is, that her virginity remained intact even after childbirth (238-9). Kristeva writes that “the ‘virgin’ attribute for Mary is a translation error” to begin with, “the translator having substituted for the Semitic term that indicates

the sociological status of a young unmarried woman the Greek word *parthenos*, which . . . specifies a physiological condition: virginity” (236-37).<sup>144</sup> The result is that the perpetual virgin, Mary, can only be a fantasy as the physiological facts of pregnancy and birth are incompatible with perpetual virginity. While Kristeva concedes that this fantasy serves a purpose in patriarchal culture, she emphasizes the damaging effects not just on women but on culture as a whole, due to all that is left out of the picture.<sup>145</sup>

The title of her piece, “*Stabat Mater*,” comes from the medieval hymn to the “*Mater Dolorosa*,” Mary standing in grief at her station of the cross, weeping at her child’s feet. Whether the grieving mother figure or the virgin mother, these images of women have had the power to edge out real physical maternal experience, which is habitually erased as taboo. But Kristeva suggests that authentic maternal space breaks out in the *jouissance* of music, for example, in the eighteenth-century Pergolesi composition of “*Stabat Mater*.”<sup>146</sup> In connecting the maternal with sound, Kristeva suggests that it is in the semiotic space of music and poetry that alternative experiences of real maternity can

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<sup>144</sup> See Schaberg for more on Mary’s status as, not a virgin, but an unmarried woman at the time of Christ’s conception. Schaberg’s scholarship has been viewed as controversial because of her emphasis on this point and on Christ’s illegitimacy.

<sup>145</sup> Kristeva focuses on the conflation of femininity and maternity in patriarchal culture, specifically Christianity. She asks two related questions: (1) what is it about this conflation that manifests itself in the Christian virgin mother that “reduces social anguish and gratifies male being”? and (2) while it might also satisfy something for women, why and how does it also ignore woman’s verbalized needs and desires? In other words, there is something comforting about the patriarchal fantasy of the Virgin Mother (a bogus impossibility not even initially claimed as fact in the Bible) to both adult men and women and to our culture as a whole, even while the fantasy negates real women’s actual experience of mothering.

<sup>146</sup> Kristeva’s absolutism—the suggestion that *all* music is connected to the maternal—can be read as problematic, to be sure, as it does not account for variances of quality or intention. However, my point is that there is an important connection to be made between H.D.’s syllabic play and mother-infant play. Furthermore, Pergolesi’s *Stabat Mater*, which is considered a particularly evocative hymn, and thus a good example for Kristeva’s purposes. Richard Will’s “Pergolesi’s *Stabat Mater*” investigates the hymn’s connection to eighteenth-century sentimentality and briefly touches on Kristeva. Will suggests that the sentimental text of the hymn was meant to evoke a real bodily reaction among listeners: body-heaving sobs and tears not unlike those achieved by Samuel Richardson’s contemporaneous sentimental novel *Pamela*, which Will offers as an unexpected though apt point of comparison (570).

begin to be expressed.<sup>147</sup> This semiotic maternal space is the space of gestation and nursing. It is pre-symbolic and is characterized not by the word but by sound: the bodily sounds of the mother's heartbeat and organs' inner workings, the sounds of the infant breathing and suckling, for example. It is amniotic, lactic, and generally aquatic or oceanic ("Sh," "s," "t," "th"). It is out of this maternal space that Kristeva's concept of "herethics" is born: "Heretical ethics—*herethics*—may just be that which enables us to tolerate thought and hence the thought of death. 'Herethics' is *a-mort, amour*. [un-death, love] *Eia mater, fons amoris* [Ah mother, fountain of love]" (263). The actual bodily experience of the maternal, the physical relation between mother and child, and the way these two beings exist in-relation (Chandler would also say) to one another creates a new ethics that negates the necessity of the parthenogenic fantasy.

Kristeva's concept of herethics is similar to H.D.'s late poetic project, begun during World War II. Before she turned her attention again to Helen in *Helen in Egypt*, H.D. considered Mary in *Trilogy* in a way that links up with Kristeva's project in "Stabat Mater." In *Trilogy*, H.D. offers a revised Christianity that is inclusive of real women's experiences and contributions to history and culture. DuPlessis points out that the first section of *Trilogy* centers on the "maternal fertility goddess," the second on traditional patriarchal gods, and the third on "rebuilding the religious and prophetic tradition between genders" (89). We must recall that *Trilogy* was written in tandem with *The Gift*, around which time H.D. was conducting her Moravian research. I argue that H.D.'s

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<sup>147</sup> "Of the virginal body we are entitled only to the ear, the tears, and the breasts. That the female sexual organ has been transformed into an innocent shell which serves only to receive sound may ultimately contribute to an eroticization of hearing and the voice, not to say of understanding. But by the same token sexuality is reduced to a mere implication. The female sexual experience is therefore anchored in the universality of sound, since the spirit is *equally* given to all men, to all women" (248).



alternative Mary is a direct result of her Moravian influence, and that through *Trilogy* she is able to offer a revised Holy Trinity based on Moravian conceptions of Christ's multi-sexual generative body, which culminates in the direct treatment of maternal sexuality that emerges in "Hermetic Definition."

To return to Faull, the Moravian figure of Christ is considered feminine because he is naked and suffering: "What makes Christ the most female of men is his wounds. But what is also important is that he is not a woman; he is not female, he is male" (35). But Faull is quick to point out that Christ is not simply female, but both male and female: the "male Christ enact[s] femaleness whether through the opening of the side wound or through the provision of succor through the blood and water issuing forth from the wound. This is an important insight" (34). Following other theological scholars like Gavin D'Costa and Leo Steinberg, Faull argues "that Christ has to remain male in order to effect the second self-ness of the believer, because if Christ is completely female then the image of the pierced and suffering woman only perpetuates the cultural inscription of women as violated, victimized, and pierced by the phallic order" (34). The central figure in Moravian theology, the crucified Christ, at whose feet the Mater Dolorosa stands, is both male and female. Faull points to Steinberg's "groundbreaking volume, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion* (first published in 1983), in which he makes the point that the genitalia [of Christ] are depicted not to underscore masculinity but to emphasize his generative humanity. Again D'Costa: 'The sidewound becomes a womb in order to give birth to the church and to offer succour (breastfeeding through the wound) Christ revealing his vulnerability to the world, to reveal his body not as sexual but as generative'" (35-36). In Moravian thought, Christ's body itself becomes maternal,

and the chief characteristic of the maternal body is its generating, sustaining, and healing relationship to others: the maternal body births, breastfeeds, and connects to its offspring.

In “Some Aspects of Moravian Theology,” Moravian historian Arthur Freeman emphasizes that a main tenet of Moravian theology is that “God in essence is relationship,” and Christ enables the Church’s relationship with God through the Trinity (3). Zinzendorf, according to Freeman, used the term “*Gemeine*” (common) to refer to the Church, but the “original, the true *Gemeine*, is the Trinity” (13). Through Christ, God becomes human—he is born, lives, and dies—and, according to Moravian theology, it is Mary standing at the foot of the cross (“*Stabat Mater*”), Jesus, and John the Baptist who become the earthly manifestation of the Trinity, the first *Gemeine*, and the beginnings of the Church; thus “the emphasis on the side-wound of Christ as the birth place of the Church” (13).<sup>148</sup> The relationship of Moravians to God is suggested in the appellation by which they address each other: brothers and sisters, children of the parental Christ figure. But when Christ takes on the female characteristics of the mother, and Mary and John stand at his feet to form the first *Gemeine*, mother and son switch places. Christ becomes maternal as Mary and John become childlike, finding sustenance in Christ’s blood and wounds like mother’s milk. Within this intimate mother-child structure of the *Gemeine* flows a commonality in the form of the Spirit, which includes a common Plan.<sup>149</sup> This

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<sup>148</sup> Interestingly, Freeman notes that “the possibility of this relationship did not depend upon understanding or ability to consciously respond, thus Zinzendorf reduced it to the relationship of the embryonic Jesus and John the Baptist: ‘I reduce it to two persons. John and Jesus, both in their mother’s wombs, and their mothers, in any case together constituted a Christian religion; there began the feeling, the experience and the inner movement which today is Christianity is regarded as dream and imagination’” (13-14).

<sup>149</sup> The concept of the Moravian common Plan is central to H.D.’s *The Mystery*, an historical novel that takes Zinzendorf’s grandchildren as two of its main characters. The Moravian protagonists are questing to find the literal Plan that will unite and save all humanity. According to Jane Augustine in her introduction to her recent edition of *The Mystery*, in the novel, H.D. foreshadows “her vision of the *Plan*’s revival and its evolution into a universal ‘Church of Love’ that obviates all sectarian divisions between nations, races,

Plan is the collective spiritual consciousness put into action, which is at the heart of H.D.'s late poetic project. Thus, just as Moravian theology emphasizes a maternal body at the center of its belief system, H.D. creates a similar maternal space in *Hermetic Definition*, a metaphorical space between mother and child (shifting and equalized) through which a collective spiritual force can call for new ways to think about culture and humanity.<sup>150</sup>

The title, "Hermetic Definition," refers to the Hermetic tradition grounded in Egyptian myth that was influenced by Greek and Christian myth. The blending of these cultural mythologies as a means to higher spiritual understanding appealed to H.D. In his foreword to *Hermetic Definition*, Pearson explains the breadth of H.D.'s knowledge out of which the poem develops: "Like many Freudians, she became quasi-Jungian and could bring the cabala, astrology, magic, Christianity, classical and Egyptian mythology, and personal experience into a joint sense of Ancient Wisdom." He defines "hermetic definition" as this Ancient Wisdom. For H.D., the Egyptian, the Greek, the Christian, the personal all create a subjectivity based on interconnectedness among human beings as well as between human beings and the divine. Isis is Helen is Mary is H.D., and all are in search of what H.D. conceives of as the archetypal "Eternal Lover" (Osiris is Achilles is Christ is Pound/Aldington/Freud/Saint-John Perse/Lionel Durand, etc.).

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and religions (xxix). H.D. links the "sacred space" of the Cathedral with "her psychoanalytic conception of unconscious mind and eternal spirit as coterminous, equally accessible to initiates of both sexes but in particularly close connection with Zinzendorf's female Holy Spirit" (xxix). Augustine concludes that H.D. "saw the Moravian church as propagating a universal eternal spirituality transcending human divisions—competing sects, warring nations, the personal opposition of male and female" (xxx).

<sup>150</sup> As a point of comparison, Henry Williams draws some connections between Quakers and Moravians: "The one worships in silence, the other in song. But it was a Quaker who observed a Moravian Lovefeast that the Spirit which moves through the silence of a Quaker Meeting is the Spirit which moves through the singing of a Moravian Lovefeast" (7-8).

In *Psyche Reborn*, Susan Stanford Friedman outlines the three parts of “Hermetic Definition” as follows. The first eighteen-lyric part, “Red Rose and a Beggar,” deals directly with the aged H.D.’s sexual attraction to and rejection by Durand, which echoes the rejection she experienced by Pound and Aldington during World War I. The second eighteen-lyric part, “Grove of Academe,” follows her recognition by her fellow poets as she wins the American Academy of Arts and Letters’ gold medal of poetry. The steady gesture of Saint-John Perse, who reached out to help H.D. as she stood to accept her award, becomes grand metaphor for her acceptance by the academy. The lyrics center on the antithetical nature of their poetry, hers characterized by the sexual “reddest rose,” his by the cerebral “cool laurels”; nonetheless, the two result in a kind of intellectual affair (148-9). The final eight-lyric part, “Star of Day,” represents her transcendence of first two modes toward a more complicated whole that includes both (146). Prompted to write the final section upon the news of Durand’s death, H.D. transforms his death into a birth.

Friedman’s reading of “Hermetic Definition” is based on H.D.’s identity as a woman poet tormented by her male cohort of poets and lovers. Durand “embodies” for H.D. “a palimpsest of personal and mythic male lovers with the amber-eyed Paris (Bar-Isis, son of Isis) as the prototype” (147). H.D.’s romantic love for and subsequent rejection by Durand is simply a link in a long relay of male lovers who dismiss her work, as lyrics twelve and thirteen of “Red Rose and a Beggar” metaphorically suggest: “the torch was lit from another before you / and another and another before that. . .” (H.D. *Hermetic* 14). In lyric thirteen, H.D. sets up the athletic decathlon star in opposition to the poet; the strength and physicality of the former seem overwhelmingly superior to the

latter. But H.D. insists that even if there is no competition between the two, perhaps there is something in common:

We cannot compete

but perhaps we can meet somewhere;

I with my seven-string lyre,

seem helpless, effete,

but where there is Olympia, Delphi is not far,

sublimation, recognition. (15)

While Durand, in his review of her work, dismissed it as being overly precious (“‘fascinating. . . / if you can stand its preciousness’ / you wrote of what I wrote”), H.D. responds that what may seem ineffectual for being overly refined, “effete,” in actuality has the power to “slay desperation” (7, 15). H.D. is insistent that poetry can have the power to effect change.

As Friedman points out, in the first two parts the heterosexual attraction H.D. feels toward Durand (or Pound or Aldington) as archetypal lover leads to her negation: “In the ‘fervor’ of her love, she seeks to be absorbed into his being, a loss of personal identity that was celebrated by both Victorian and Freudian ideologies of femininity” (147). She quotes the following lines from lyric two where the speaker proclaims to the object of her desire, “Doge— Venice— / you are my whole estate; I would hide in your

mind / as a child in an attic,” in order to show how H.D. loses herself and her identity in the presence of the male poet-lover (4). Friedman identifies Venice as associated with Pound and Aldington, and shows how Durand is palimpsestically applied to this role.<sup>151</sup> And H.D. was keeping up correspondences with Aldington, who was living in Venice part of the time in 1960 and 1961, while she was composing “Hermetic Definition.”<sup>152</sup> It bears noting, too, however, that the lines allude to *The Merchant of Venice*. Early in Act 1, Scene 1, Antonio explains that his depression that opens the play is not due to financial trouble: “My ventures are not in one bottom trusted, / Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate” (44-45). Since his portfolio is diversified, as it were, his finances are in good shape and are not the cause of his sadness. A few lines later, he denies that love is the cause as well; however, critics have speculated that this is not exactly true, and that Antonio’s depression is the result of his unrequited love for Bassanio who is soon to marry Portia. In any case, H.D. turns the lines around and designates the Durand figure as her whole estate, whose loss is the reason for her mourning. (Unlike Antonio’s claims, H.D. has put all her eggs in one basket.)

For H.D., when Durand fails to return her correspondence, the loss—of her whole estate—is devastating. It would seem that the powerful Doge figure would be the one to exact punishment. And “Hermetic Definition” is full of references to punishment in the figure of “Asmodel,” the angel of the zodiac sign Taurus (and the months of April/May when H.D. and Durand meet) and as well the angel of punishment.<sup>153</sup> But in alluding to *The Merchant of Venice*, H.D. complicates the punishing heterosexual relationship that

<sup>151</sup> In addition to Pound’s usual association with Venice (cf. Canto III), Pound traveled to Venice with Aldington and H.D. soon after they were married.

<sup>152</sup> See Zilboorg 422. H.D. planned to meet Aldington and Pound in Venice but was too ill to make the trip.

<sup>153</sup> See Davidson, *Dictionary of Angels*, referenced in Pearson’s foreword.

Friedman interprets. At the end of the play, when Antonio, as guarantor, is in court, the Doge of Venice declines to settle the case, instead allowing a “young doctor of law,” in actuality Portia in disguise, to decide the case. Portia shows mercy (as in her famous “quality of mercy” speech), and, through a legal loophole in the contract that disallows the drawing of blood in extracting the pound of flesh, lets Antonio off the hook and requires Shylock to pay for drawing blood. Thus, the central powerful figure in *The Merchant of Venice* is not the Doge, but Portia, a woman.

While it may seem like the speaker in “Hermetic Definition” is simply relinquishing all power to the male poet-lover, H.D.’s allusions suggest a more complicated understanding of power based on female authority. DuPlessis points out, and I concur, that the septuagenarian H.D.’s explicit desire for the much younger Durand is culturally taboo and very rarely seen in literature: “How can a woman of advanced age speak outright about a staggering—and virtually unreciprocated—sexual desire, and as well the ‘unfaltering desire to move towards a ‘Lover’?” (126). If the unrequited homosexual love between Antonio and Bassanio is the unspoken center of *The Merchant of Venice*, the explicit heterosexual desire H.D. expresses for Durand is a source of power in “Hermetic Definition.” And the latter is much more taboo than the former. It is extremely brave of H.D. to use such an uncelebrated desire as the centerpiece of her final poem, and I argue that she does this as she strives to create an authoritative space in which to consider human relatedness as central to subject formation. But I also want to suggest that the female authority she introduces is not only sexual but also maternal. In the lyric two of “Red Roses and a Beggar,” H.D. introduces the maternal metaphor that then extends through to the final part of “Hermetic Definition,” “Star of Day.” The poet-

speaker is not simply a female lover losing herself in her lover; the metaphor is not simply romantic, but also maternal. The speaker takes the position of the child within the body of the beloved (the child in the attic).<sup>154</sup> The beloved's is the maternal body, and the speaker is the child within. Using Chandler's indictment against autonomy, I wish to trouble Friedman's reading that "Hermetic Definition" simply represents the woman poet's loss of self. I argue, instead, that H.D. builds a complex maternal metaphor across the three parts of "Hermetic Definition," based on a Moravian-influenced concept of the archetypal mother-child relationship.

DuPlessis notes that H.D.'s "erotic obsession" is transformed into "imagined maternity: her 'Lover' becomes her child. The elegy, that familiar genre, has been mediated by gender, and becomes an annunciation, a pregnancy, a birth" (128). While it is true that the lover becomes the child by the end of the poem, in the beginning, the roles are reversed. The poet-speaker is the child of the Eternal-Lover/mother. This flipping of roles is based on a similar role reversal in Moravian theology, and H.D. is explicit in her insistence that neither the mother nor the child is subordinate to the other. Instead, they are equals. The last stanza of the poem, "mated, exactly the same, / equal in power, together yet separate, your eyes' amber" evokes intriguing notions of pregnancy, of two subjects within one, reminiscent of Kristeva's metaphorical subjects-in-process. Both beings are "equal in power," "matched," "mated" (4). Not just mother and child, they are mates, twins, two beings *in relation*. They are two subjects within one, in process of becoming.

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<sup>154</sup> This is not unlike the Moravian child-like state as described in the previously quoted *Litany of Wounds*.



Reading backwards, we can see how the concept of relatedness, is central to the long poem. Part Two, “Grove of Academe,” for example, meditates on the notion of two equal beings in relation in the form of a poetic conversation with Saint-John Perse. Many of the part’s lyrics are characterized by poet-to-poet reading and response. In lyric eleven, for example, the poet enacts a reading of Saint-John Perse’s *Exil*, written at the start of his permanent exile from France in World War II, in the original French. The poem opens with the speaker striving to understand the meaning of some key lines: “But here, I don’t know what you mean, / does anyone? what are you / *lois de transhumance et de derivation?*” (36). Commonly translated as “laws of migration and drifting,” the English transliteral translation evokes a myriad of connected meanings for H.D.: the poet asks, “are we translated, transubstantiated[. . . ]” (36)? The relational act of reading and translating from the French makes transforms the reader and writer, both lifelong exiles. The speaker enacts a kind of flesh-made-word transubstantiation in the poem, where she becomes a tree or rose bush:

derived from tree or bush?

rest under my branches,

believe me, I would be

your *hybride tres rare*

*se rosier-ronce hymalayen. . .* (36)

The tone is flirtatious as the poet transforms into the rare hybrid, the Himalayan bramble-rose, to translate.. *The reddest rose unfolds*.

It would seem here that in taking on this sexual guise, the poet's own flesh-and-blood body disappears: "you would not recognize me, / as all fretful traces of humanity / vanished; from under thorn and leaf[. . .]" (36). But the aging H.D. also returns to her sexually fecund youth with this metaphor. During her adolescent romance with Pound, she was known as Dryad, a tree nymph. The sexual metaphor is recurrent, and it is not unusual for H.D. to take on the guise of the tree-like sexual object.<sup>155</sup> In this lyric the speaker is taking on the identity of one of the Hesperides, the garden nymphs who give Perseus supplies to help him slay the Gorgon. Playing on Perse's name, the speaker designates him the Perseus figure who must "meet the Gorgon, the Monster again, / slay, and accept Fate, *que ce monde est insane* [that this world is insane]" (36). The lyric ends with the speaker's declaration that *Exil* is nothing if not a gift to her, "recompense" from Perseus to the goddess who guided him to kill the Gorgon.

In H.D.'s intellectual affair with Perse, her body disappears. In later poems she describes herself as ant, eel, snake (insect, reptile, fish, anything but mammal). She is removed from her mammalian body. However, "transhumance" in English refers to the seasonal migration of shepherds and livestock or cattle. Such migrating cultures live off the milk of their livestock. Milk is the unspoken subtext that only surfaces in the continual references to the stars, the Milky Way, which spell out such mythological tales

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<sup>155</sup> The sexualized tree-maiden is also reminiscent of Myrrha, Adonis's mother who gave birth to him after being transformed into a myrrh tree. For a striking image of this myth, see Franceschini's 1690 painting, *The Birth of Adonis*. Myrrh, as DuPlessis points out, is important in the metaphors of H.D.'s late poetry. The Greek Myrrha-Adonis dyad is related to the Egyptian Isis-Horus mother-son dyad as Isis is occasionally depicted as a tree offering a breast to Horus.

as those H.D. alludes to. In a later lyric in “Grove of Academe,” “*transhumance*” and “*derivation*” resurface to point to the impending rebirth of the poet: “. . . your *derivation* / whatever you meant by that / transformed by self-seeking / my quest to content” (38). But milk is the subtext. There are a few instances in *Hermetic Definition* where H.D. refers to striking the breast. These never directly refer to breastfeeding, but given the central Mary-Christ or Isis-Bar-Isis dyad, such images cannot help but be evoked.<sup>156</sup> For example, lyric fourteen of “Grove of Academe” ends with a reference to Durand’s premature death by a heart attack brought on by exposure to tear gas, and H.D.’s will to resuscitate him: “Paris, Bar-Isis; I must creep into his cavern, / beat my hand on his breast, wake his heart to this instant” (40). The imagery conflates the Eternal Lover with the child, and with the mother. While beating the hand on the breast literally refers to the technique of trying to restart the heart, it is also reminiscent of the nursing child pawing and patting the lactating breast to stimulate milk flow. A couple pages later, lyric 16 begins, “How wonderful to strike my breast,” referring to the act of beating on one’s own chest in repentance; it cannot help but evoke the same image given that “*Hermetic Definition*” culminates in the symbolic pregnancy and parturition.

It is not until the final part of the poem, “Star of Day,” when the aged H.D. hears of the death of her beloved Durand, that she transforms herself into the mother figure, pregnant with the beloved, who, Christ-like, is born upon his death.<sup>157</sup> The third lyric in

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<sup>156</sup> Throughout Christian and Egyptian Mythological iconography, breastfeeding is central to the depiction of the mother-child relationship. See Speert 333-360.

<sup>157</sup> Christ’s birth, death, and rebirth are central to Christianity, and other non-Christian deities are commonly reborn after death. H.D.’s superimposition onto Christ of such deities as the Egyptian Amun or Osiris, or the Greek Adonis, for example, who die and are reborn, is a common recurrence in her oeuvre. In Moravian theology, death is not to be feared because of the believers’ understanding of Christ’s humanity and divine resurrection. According to Fogel, “Death is a holy moment, when believers entered the side

“Star of Day” encompasses and explains the transformation that occurs for the speaker upon learning of Durand’s death, “a little over nine months to the day,” after they first met in April 1960 (48). She explains, “I did not realize my state of mind, / my ‘condition’ you might say, / until August when I wrote, *the reddest rose unfolds*” (49). Later she says, by the time she realizes she is (imaginatively) pregnant, “it was too late to cast you out” (52). Too late to terminate, the metaphoric pregnancy must continue. The only way to get out of it is to go through it. The pregnancy must lead to birth: “I did not realize that separation / was the only solution, / if I were to resolve this curious ‘condition’” (49). But in her realization, she understands her position differently:

as I wrote, *I walk into you,*

*Doge— Venice—*

I didn’t think of it the other way,

that it was you who walked into me,

the experience was unprecedented. (50)

Quoting her own lines from the first part of “Hermetic Definition,” the speaker realizes the role reversal. The final line of the third lyric, the Antonio allusion—“*you are my whole estate*”—now acquires deeper meaning. Instead of the speaker’s identity being absorbed by the lover, she contains him. Her being takes in his. Upon Durand’s death,

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wound and their marriage with Christ was consummated, accompanied by signing and deathbed litanies” (90). In entering the side wound, believers were metaphorically re-entering the womb to be reborn. The consummation of this marriage with Christ allows for rebirth.

and H.D. nearing the end of her own life, “my whole estate” evokes last wills and testaments. However, following Chandler, I want to suggest that the speaker is not simply an autonomous being who possesses the beloved, but that they are two beings in-relation. She is changed by him, transformed.

The Christian allusions are clear. “Venice” is twice transformed into “Venus” in the poem (7, 49), connecting to the title of the third part, “Star of Day.” Venus is the morning (and evening) star, the third brightest object seen in the sky after the sun and moon. In Revelations 22:16, Jesus refers to himself as the “bright morning star,” and in some Marian litanies, Mary herself is referred to as the morning star. In Greek mythology, the morning star and the evening star, both appearances of Venus, were thought to be two different celestial bodies, known as the gods Phosphorus and Hesperus. In Ovid, they are twins, their parents Astreus and Eos. Thus, H.D.’s hermetic definition superimposes the Egyptian Isis-Osiris/Bar-Isis upon the Greek twins of Astreus and Eos upon the Christian Mary/Christ. The relationships are shifting, but the constants are that two equal beings are as one, always in relation to one another, always becoming.

The final lyrics in “Star of Day” deal with the inevitable parturition, birth (which is also the death of Durand) as the separation of mother and child. The birth is an arduous, painful task, and here the speaker uses the ritual of prayer to come through. Her prayer concludes the lyric:

“separate us now eternally,

let severance be complete,

the cord is cut?" no[. . .] (53)

She declares, "I have nine months to remember" (53). Although the birth ends with the separation of mother and child, the mother always carries with her the memory of pregnancy where two beings are one, where her being is in the process of becoming. The final poem, where the separation is complete, is sonically alive with "o" sounds: "Now you are born / and it's all over, / will you leave me alone? (55)

The "o" sounds are at once sorrowful and mournful but also carry the power of the childbirth. And indeed, over the course of the poem, the refrain "*the reddest rose unfolds*" takes on further bodily meaning when it begins to evoke not just sexual desire but also the cervix opening up in childbirth.<sup>158</sup> The double meaning begins to occur in "Red Rose and a Beggar," lyric nine, when it precedes the line, "can I endure this?" (11). The question of whether one can "endure" the ordeal is also typical of birth. Sex and birth are superimposed in their connection to pain and possible death. In the final lyric, the pain of parturition ends with the poet-speaker alone, mother and child separated by birth. And the final marker for the separation of birth is lactation. Milk comes after birth to feed the child that was once part of the mother's body but is now separate. It is also a marker for a continued relationship. Thus, "o" takes on a third meaning, the o-shape of the breast, the areola (Latin for "open area"), the circular space around the nipple where the child latches on in order to feed. In western art and literature, it is common to compare

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<sup>158</sup> The cervix in its normal state resembles a pink umbilicus with a small central opening. During labor, the thick tissue thins, softens, and dilates. The image of the flower unfolding is traditionally used as a metaphor for the opening cervix during childbirth, and the mantra "o-o-o-open" is today a commonly used ritual of natural childbirth.

the breasts to rosebuds: *the reddest rose unfolds*.<sup>159</sup> But who is born at the end of the poem, and who is nourished by mother's milk?

H.D., whose first pregnancy ended in stillbirth, knows what it is like to come through an entire pregnancy and birth without a living child in the end. But the pregnancy and birth H.D. creates as the extended metaphor in "Hermetic Definition" does not end in stillbirth, but in rebirth of a transformed poet-mother figure who is sufficient. The final lyric of "Hermetic Definition" finds the poet alone after the birth, death, or "separation": "I only know / this room contains me, / it is enough for me."<sup>160</sup> In *Trilogy*, as DuPlessis points out, H.D. transforms Mary, making her the center of Christian religion: "Because Mary carries a book, not a baby, H.D. proposes the female authority of scribe and lawgiver, but unlike Sibyl 'shut up in a cave', it is not a law in collaboration with (Roman) patriarchy. H.D. offers the possibility that Mary is not a conduit for One whom she bore, but is herself the One: the goddess is God" (93). Whereas the Mary's maternal role is made secondary to law-giving role in *Trilogy*, the maternal in *Hermetic Definition* is re-emphasized as it creates the mother-poet as the One. The Christ-Child figure is not gone but is one with the mother, transformed into the mother figure who is reborn in the end: "*the reddest rose, / the unalterable law. . . / Night brings the Day*" (55). Again, quoting herself, the "*reddest rose*," symbol of female sexuality (both post-menopausal and maternal) in which the poet finds authority, is unstoppable. It is the archetypal cycle of life. It is also an allusion to George Meredith's "Lucifer in Starlight," a response to

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<sup>159</sup> See, for example, Speert, for an image of eighteenth-century French artist Gabriel Jacques Saint-Aubin's painting, *La Comparaison du Bouton de Rose* (23).

<sup>160</sup> Does the final turn to "me" undercut the point of relatedness? Or does the "me"—the reborn, transformed mother-poet always contain relatedness in having been pregnant and having given birth, to herself?

Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which concludes by comparing the stars to "an army of unalterable law."<sup>161</sup> By quoting and changing Meredith's famous line to refer to and include female sexuality as spirituality, H.D. is altering the unalterable law to include women. "Night brings the Day"—the "Star of Day" and the evening star are one in the same, Venus, Isis, the poet-mother dying, birthing, being reborn. The end points to an ongoing-ness, a process, not unlike Chandler's conception of mothering as a verb, in process, and not unlike the Moravian notion of a Christ who is both male and female, who is generative through the incorporation of maternal sexuality. At the end of "Star of Day," the mother-poet figure who is born is H.D.

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<sup>161</sup> Meredith, incidentally, was educated at the Moravian School in Neuwied, Germany.



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